Cibola

ALICE WALWORTH GRAHAM

A novel of love and hate on a Mississippi River plantation

c.
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Cibola, like many plantations in the antebellum South, was a remote island set in a sea of swamps. Out of sight and hearing, behind closed doors and shutters, there could be tangled relationships, violent quarrels, even violent deaths. The swamps veiled secrets, past and future.

At first Cibola held no violence for Missy, who had just turned nineteen. It was her home, where she was happiest riding barefoot through the tangled wilds, where she became enamored of the most handsome man she had ever met—but fell in love with a river boat pilot.

Cibola did, however, hold tangled relationships for her. The plantation had been originally built by Missy's father, who at his death left it to Missy and her brother Roy. Their mother lived with them but took no interest in the life at Cibola and frequently escaped to more fashionable watering places. And although Missy and Roy actually ran the plantation, Aunt Agnes ran the big house, having no love for the servants or the many activities that went on around her.

Violence came quietly to Cibola in the person of Dr. Arnold Baring—and later his nephew, Philip — a doctor who married Missy's mother and tried to drive Missy

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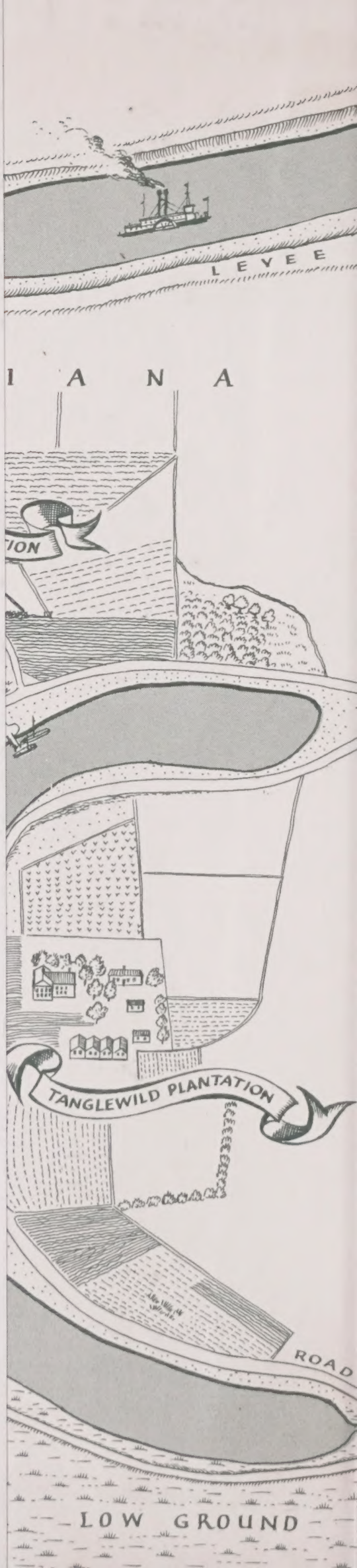

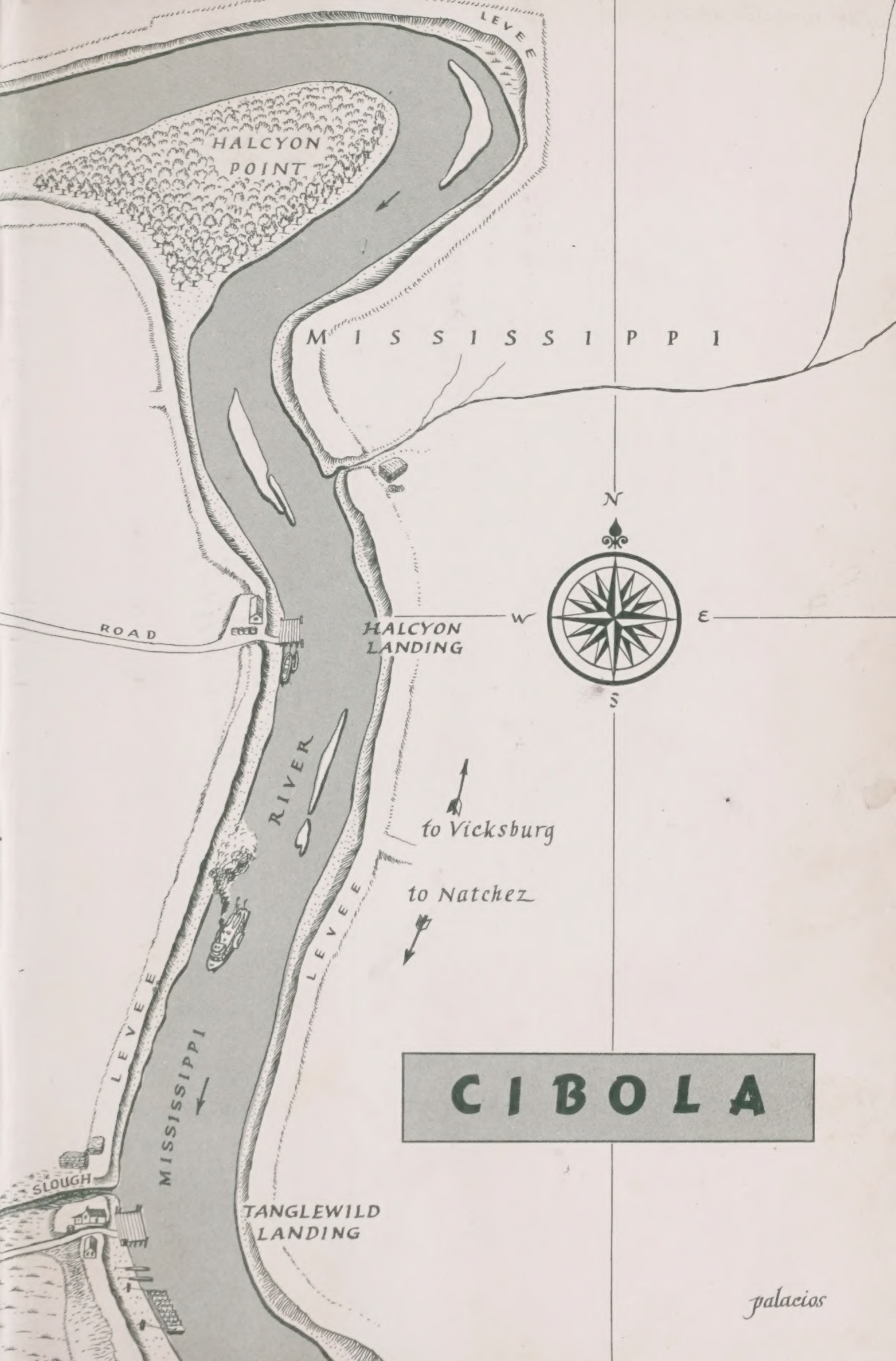
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CIBOLA

Books by Alice Walworth Graham

Lost River
Natchez Woman
Romantic Lady
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Shield of Honor
The Vows of the Peacock
Cibola

CIBOLA

Alice Walworth Graham

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All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Dedicated to

Margaret Brooks Wynn

FOREWORD

"The Spanyards have notice of Seven Cities which old men of the Indians show them should lie towards the north-east from Mexico. They have used and use daily much diligence in seeking of them, but they cannot find any one of them." The sixteenth-century map maker, Richard Hakluyt, was alluding to the haunting myth of Cibola.

Like the other conquistadores, De Soto set out to find and seize the shining cities of Cibola, made of gold. Pushing through the southern wilderness in his long search, he found the dark river the Indians called "The Father of Waters," and death.

Hidden in the swamp, but famous from Memphis to New Orleans, the big cotton plantation curves around a lake—one of the cast-off loops of the Mississippi. According to local tradition, De Soto was buried in this half-moon lake, which in his time had been part of the river. Named for a legend, Cibola plantation acquired its own legends, and for generations fired tantalizing dreams of riches, resulting in violence and tragedy.

New Orleans, Louisiana
January 1962

PART ONE

Chapter One

Missy watched the *Eclipse* draw away from the landing, then turned her horse and rode over the levee, into the trees growing at the lower corner of Tanglewild plantation, part of her own property. Beyond the cluster of cottonwoods, the fields spread out, and though she couldn't see the hands as they hoed the cotton, she could hear their voices. The familiar path she was following soon brought her to the road. Around the first turn of the road, she saw an elderly Negro ambling toward her, and called, "Mawnin', Uncle Job."

He smiled when he saw her, answered, "Mawnin', Missy," and held up his string of cool, silvery fish to show her.

"They always bite for you," she said, halting to talk to him.

He told her he had plenty and to spare, if her mouth was set for catfish.

"Every day and Sunday," she answered. "But we have some at the house—you keep those, thank you just the same."

The mare was nuzzling affectionately at the old man, while he murmured, "Howdy, Bess, howdy, gal." Job had a way with all kinds of plants and animals. Missy congratulated him on looking spry, they congratulated each other on the hot weather—good cotton-growing weather—and she rode on. An egret, decked in sparkling spun-glass feathers, waded in the lake's shallows. The water was motionless in a summer trance, reflecting the sky's pale blaze. The lake was a discarded loop of the river, left when the Mississippi had changed its course. On the other side of the lake, across from Tanglewild, was Cibola plantation.

It was more to Missy than the hundreds of thousands of dollars

her father, in his lifetime, had refused for it. Cibola was home, where she and her brother had found a child's paradise, where, outdoors at least, she could still keep a child's joy in the day, the hour, the season, everything she saw and heard. Invisible from a distance, or from the river, however you reached it, by the road she was following, or by the road leading to the front gate, or by rowing across the lake, Cibola kept its air of secrecy, revealing itself slowly, little by little.

Tree-lined roads branched to the quarters, the gin, the overseer's house, and the big house. The evenly spaced rows of whitewashed cabins, each with its little patch of flowers and vegetables, and the church, just beyond, were set in a grassy space, crisscrossed by ribbons of paths and encircled by trees. Live oaks clustered around the gin and the overseer's house, fruit trees made a narrow edging around the fields which were open to the sky. A clump of cedars, magnolias, and weeping willows marked the family graveyard.

The plantation had been a Spanish land grant, and the Severadas were Spanish Creoles; they had always clung with jealous tenacity to every grain of their soil, and had chosen to be buried in Cibola's earth. Missy had been named for her father's mother, Ana Miranda Severada. Once or twice before his death, her father had talked to her a little about his mother. By then, Missy had found out why no one else ever mentioned her, except in whispers, because she had asked her mammy, who had told her the whole story.

As a child, Missy had always thought of herself as two separate people. Missy belonged outdoors, where she could be her natural self, "wild as a hawk" the colored people said; Miranda belonged indoors, and at least outwardly conformed to the pattern expected of a well brought up little girl. As she grew older, she sometimes felt the existence of yet a third person, perhaps someone like the other Ana Miranda, who had taken what she wanted most.

The road skirted fields patterned with rows of cotton, in bloom now, showing red and white blossoms among dark green leaves, the plants taking a gloss from the blinding light. Beyond were the stables, pastures, barns and orchards, then the gardens, spreading around the house like an open fan. All of the outbuildings repeated the design of the house on a smaller scale and, at the edge of the lake, delicate columns had the airy

glisten of spun sugar, a graceful little eighteenth-century Folly, to complete a gentleman's Palladian mansion, though everybody had lapsed into calling it the summerhouse.

Missy went through a wide gate, taking the back driveway, and the big house came into view. Sometimes, coming upon it, she felt that there was a strangeness, a magic in its being here at all—exactness, order, and artifice emerging from the formless tangle of the Louisiana swamp. Sometimes she felt that it had always been here, and always would be. Built in the Greek revival style, with columned galleries all the way around it, in spite of its size it never dazed the eye with any impression of overblown vastness. On the contrary, proportion, symmetry, the perfection of every architectural detail gave a satisfying sense of harmony, blending well with the trees and gardens and fields around it.

When Ernest Severada had built it in 1819, over twenty years ago, people had gasped at his boldness, his pride, and had even said he had lost his mind. Ernest had paid no attention to comments, but had gone ahead with his plans, and had created sophisticated elegance in the wilderness, without losing sight of the conditions of life here, or the particular problem living behind a levee imposed. He had put his house on the highest available ground, where no floods had ever been known to reach, though, in this flat country, height was imperceptible and measured by inches. Wary of the river, he had taken care to protect his house from the invasions of future floods, and the lower floor was fourteen feet from the ground.

The big rooms, with their long windows opening on to wide galleries, suited the burning suns and drenching rains of the extravagant climate. Ample space suited the lavish pattern of hospitality Ernest had established, for frequent entertainments and guests, who came often and sometimes lingered for months.

In the gardens, the roses were blooming, white, yellow, pink and red, but the reds predominated, ranging from scarlet to darkest crimson, making a blaze in the hot sun. In the late fall, the camellia japonicas opened, flowering all through the winter, unless there were too many hard freezes. Even then, some buds were left, to bloom on until the azaleas frilled the lake and glowed through the gardens in pale and vivid colors of rose and coral and pink.

Missy rode up to the carriage block at the back steps. One of

the stableboys saw her, and came up to take her mare. The routine of the plantation, and the house, was going on as it had before her father's death, nearly five years ago, yet beneath the surface, she felt how much had changed here. Instead of being able to ask if her father had come in from "riding the place," so she could find him and talk over plantation affairs with him, she asked one of the houseboys, Little Joe, if her stepfather had gone out yet, in order to avoid him. He had gone in his gig, Little Joe told her, taking his doctor's bag with him.

Sounds of brisk stirrings and whiffs of cakes baking came from the kitchen, extra preparations, Missy thought, in honor of her brother's return from two months in New Orleans. Roy was twenty, and was often away. Even when he was living at home, he was seldom in the house. He had his own pleasures and pursuits, and was no longer dependent on his sister's company, as he had been when they had been younger.

Missy ran up the back steps to her own rooms in the south wing, where she found her maid Rosie in the bedroom, putting away the petticoats and pantalettes the laundress had just sent, taking care not to crush frills crisp from the fluting iron. A large, placid, sweet-tempered girl, Rosie was the same age as Missy; they had played together as children and had grown up together. At the sight of Missy's tousled hair and bare feet, Rosie murmured, "Lawd!" and set to work making her presentable.

When Missy left the room again, her hair was combed back smoothly and drawn into a chignon; she wore her white muslin dress sprigged with green that rustled over layers of petticoats, and thin kid slippers, tied by ribbons crisscrossed around her ankles. On the surface at least, she had followed all the rules transforming a little girl into a young lady. At fifteen, her skirts had been lengthened to show only the last two frills of her pantalettes. At sixteen, pantalettes and ankles had vanished; skirts were "officially down" and hair was "up," proclaiming a full-fledged status, ready for beaux and ballrooms.

Growing up was different, and had come suddenly and painfully with her father's death. She had been fourteen then and would be nineteen this summer. For three winters, she had gone to the Elizabeth Female Academy, near Natchez. With the end of this spring's term, the headmistress had presented her with a book, *Les Fleurs Animées*, and a gilt-edged scroll which had

proclaimed her "finished." She had come back to Cibola where she intended to stay; where her stepfather, it seemed, intended to stay. As she went along the upstairs gallery and into the upper hall, she was thinking of how he happened to be here.

Her parents had gone to New Orleans over four years ago, and there her father had been taken ill. By the time she and Roy, with the Ardens, the family's nearest neighbors and closest friends, had reached him, her father had seemed much better. The most eminent doctor in New Orleans had been in charge of the case, but when the sudden attack had struck Ernest Severada in the middle of the night, the manager of the hotel had been afraid to wait until the famous Dr. Granier could be found and had sent a doctor who had happened to be staying in the hotel at the time. So, by chance, Arnold Baring had come in contact with Ernest Severada's wife and children.

Missy had been much too concerned about her father to have more than the vaguest memory of her first meeting with Dr. Baring. She could only recall a hearty handshake, and a cheerful voice giving her optimistic news. Though the other doctors had not been as reassuring, in a few days Ernest had been able to board the steamboat for home. Every now and then, Missy remembered, her mother had repeated: "All of us should be very grateful to Dr. Baring. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't been right there to come to your father and give him the right medicines."

After he had reached Cibola, Ernest had lived for several weeks, then died quietly in his sleep, leaving Dr. Frank Arden guardian to his son and daughter. Missy had forgotten Arnold Baring's existence, until her mother had told her family that she was going to marry him. He had written her a letter of condolence, and when she had visited friends in New Orleans, he had called, and had kept on calling. There was no reason why a middle-aged widow should not marry a middle-aged widower. From what he told of himself, from what Frank Arden could find out about him, Dr. Baring seemed respectable, adequate in his profession, though he had wandered from place to place.

He had accounted for it by saying the town where he had first practiced had disagreed with his health. He had gone to Alabama where he married, but his wife had developed consumption. After her death, he had been restless, had come to New Orleans, and

had decided to settle there. Missy had blamed only herself for her lack of enthusiasm for him. Everyone else seemed to like him. Perhaps she might have learned to like him—had he continued to practice in New Orleans.

Roy had invited his mother and his new stepfather to pay a visit to Cibola after their wedding trip. Missy, of course, had been at boarding school at the time. Though she granted Roy had done the right thing, in her heart she had never wanted her stepfather at Cibola. She had consoled herself by thinking he would soon go back to his practice in New Orleans, but, during the visit, Dr. Frank Arden, always overworked, always riding for miles to reach his patients, had caught a heavy cold with fever. Dr. Baring had taken over his patients for him.

A letter from her mother had told Missy how the visit had lengthened. "*Your Uncle Frank is well again, but Dr. Baring has decided to give up going back to New Orleans. He says he could easily build up a good practice in this neighborhood and wants to be a country doctor. I am rather sorry he did not choose Natchez, but he had to choose for himself.*"

With one of his sudden impulses, Roy had invited his mother and stepfather to live on at Cibola until they could buy land and build for themselves, or find a house. That had been last February. So far, Baring had neither bought nor built. He seemed content to stay on at Cibola. Missy suspected him of wanting to stay forever. Since their father had left the plantation, with everything on it including the house, to both of his children, it belonged as much to Roy as to her. Missy had to endure her stepfather unless she hurt her mother's feelings or quarreled with her brother. Anxious to avoid family dissension, she made up her mind to be patient, or to find some other way.

Unless company was expected, her mother seldom came downstairs until dinnertime. This morning, Missy found her trying on the new summer dresses the *Eclipse* had brought, and complaining because her indispensable maid Hannah, though she struggled, couldn't fasten the dresses at the waistline. They would have to be let out, she said, and Miss Juliette would have to be laced tighter too. She whisked the new clothes away, and Juliette sank into a chair, fanning. "Trying them on in this heat has given me a bad headache."

There had been a time when she had worried her daughter

with her various symptoms, but Missy had found out that a headache meant that something had gone wrong, and the need for taking a cure at a fashionable watering place didn't mean a decline into consumption, but a yearning to see everybody and be seen, and to show off diamonds and cashmeres finer than any other woman's display. Sometimes her mother's visits and travels were to escape some situation or problem.

"I don't see how I could have gained an ounce," Juliette sighed. "I eat like a bird."

She used the cliché in its generally accepted sense, her daughter knew. It must have been invented by someone who knew nothing of the habits of birds. Of course her mother did eat like a bird—all day long. On the table, beside a bottle of eau de cologne, there always was an open box of French chocolates.

"This stifling heat never agrees with me." Juliette leaned back and closed her eyes. "It might do me good to go to the Springs for a month or so. Everybody agrees it's not healthy to stay in the swamp too long." Her plump little hand reached into the box of chocolates.

"You never like being in the country too long at a time, Mamma. Maybe you'd rather Dr. Baring set up a practice in Natchez instead of here."

"I hoped he would when he said New Orleans was too much of a city," Juliette answered. "Your father left me a house in Natchez, you know. And there's a pleasant social life, but Dr. Baring seems to prefer building up a practice here."

"You might talk to him about it, Mamma, ask him if he would consider moving to Natchez. It's near here, and you have so many friends there and around there."

"I might talk to him sometime—maybe when I come back from the Springs."

"If you really want him to make the move, hadn't you better discuss it with him now, ma'am, before he builds up a practice here?"

"A month or so won't make any difference, dear," Juliette answered. "Wait until it's cooler."

Knowing her mother's passivity, Missy realized how useless it was to try to prod her any further. Though she would prefer to live in Natchez, she would never bestir herself. Someone would have to arrange it for her, waft her there. She would salve her

own discontent by going to the Springs, paying long visits to friends and relatives, and asking them here. Irritated as she was by her mother's lack of initiative, Missy didn't want her to feel any qualms about her own welcome here. Poor mamma! She could stay on forever. The trouble was she never seemed to question her husband's long stay, or seemed to wonder if her children's welcome to her extended to their stepfather, and could be stretched indefinitely.

Passive and indolent as her mother was, she had her own brand of stubbornness, as Missy knew, her own ways of evading problems. Was this two-month excursion to the Springs escape from the country or escape from her second husband? It was hard to tell, because she never showed any interest in men's workaday life, and as she had never learned any details of plantation management, she would be equally indifferent to Dr. Baring's practice. Missy could not be sure whether the indifference extended to Baring himself.

Never mind, she thought, resolving to bypass her mother, and find some way of moving Baring out of Cibola.

"Your father always lived on the plantation." Juliette had taken great pride in her position as Mrs. Ernest Severada of Cibola. Now it belonged to her children, but they took pains to keep her from feeling dethroned.

"He belonged here," Missy said, looking around the luxurious room, at the big bed where the second husband was nightly ensconced. "I'm going over to Halcyon, Mamma, unless you need me."

"I have Hannah, dear. But why do you go out in this heat?"

"Aunt Lucie and I are reading Shakespeare."

Her guardian's wife was neither aunt nor cousin, but she was dearer than the real aunt, by far.

"Your school days should be behind you, Miranda. It's not a good thing to read too many heavy books. Nothing's worse than to be labeled a blue stocking. If men suspect you are the least tiny bit of a blue they'll run."

Missy didn't count on the Severada fortune to make her a success. The long-legged, sun-browned young men she knew did not pursue girls for their money. Heiresses, if they were plain and dull, were left to droop by the wall, while pretty, charming girls without a picayune were surrounded.

"They haven't started running away yet, Mamma."

"They will if you don't take better care of your complexion, dear. If you insist on going out when the sun is high, you must wear a thick veil and take your parasol."

"I'm going in the carriage, Mamma."

"It's an open carriage, dear—use your parasol."

Juliette hoped and expected her daughter to shine as a belle for a season or two, then to make a suitable marriage.

"Yes, Mamma," Missy answered. Her mother was always ready to advise her about her looks, her clothes and her manners, but as their temperaments were very different, Missy listened politely, then followed her own tastes. As she had found out long ago, when it came to anything important, she couldn't depend on her mother's help. Perhaps her mother, in her vague discontent, was asking help from her.

Before she left for Halcyon, Missy knocked on her aunt's door. Miss Agnes Snowe was fond of implying she had stayed unmarried first to take care of her invalid father, and then, after his death, to take charge of her sister's household and bring up her sister's children. No one contradicted her to her face. Mr. Snowe had earned local renown by "drinking up three plantations." As soon as Ernest had become engaged to Juliette Snowe, he bought in Tanglewild plantation from the creditors, put the land and the house in perfect order, and had taken over the support of his wife-to-be's family.

Dissatisfied with the house at Tanglewild, Agnes had found some excuse to move herself and her father to Cibola, where Mr. Snowe, provided with good whiskey, soon drank himself to death. Agnes had stayed on at Cibola ever since, little by little taking over the rule of the house. She bullied Juliette and the two sisters bickered constantly, but Juliette was glad to have someone to manage the big house, take care of the servants, plan the dinners and receptions, see to the comfort of the stream of guests, and help with the semiannual ordeal of "furnishing," when on every plantation, large or small, the women had to cut and sew the clothes for the hands.

Sometimes Agnes would say, "Even a poor dependent has her pride," and threaten to go and live with Cousin Julia in Natchez. She would order the servants to bring her trunks from the attic. The thudding and thumping of the trunks was a familiar sound.

The packing was never begun, and in a day or two the servants would haul them back to the attic again. Between Missy, her father, Roy, and the Ardens, "going to Cousin Julia's" was the term for any wholly mythical undertaking.

Agnes had flattered and deferred to her first brother-in-law, though Missy had guessed there had never been any real affection between them. The petty quarreling had taken place out of his sight and hearing. Indoors, he had found a smoothly running household, his womenfolk were beautifully dressed, socially at ease, and knew how to entertain. Cibola was famous for its beauty and its hospitality. He had been a generous, warmhearted, fiery-tempered man, indulgent to his wife and children. More than his son, his daughter had shared his interests, and had his passion for the land. He had taught her all the stages of making a crop, had showed her how to manage a plantation, had talked over his business affairs with her as if she had been an adult, and had made a companion of her.

Missy found her aunt sitting at her desk—she always called it an escritoire—making out a list of guests for the soirée. As soon as Missy came in, Agnes began to talk about all the preparations and planning involved if the soirée was to be a success, ending with, "But I try to make myself useful."

This was the cue for Missy to respond with, "You know we couldn't get on without you." Missy said nothing. Useful, yes, but not unrewarded. The luster bowl on the desk was filled with roses, the room was attractive in all its fresh summer array of white embroidered curtains and draperies. In this wing, Agnes Snowe had her bedroom, dressing room, and sitting room, just as Missy had in the wing opposite. Like her sister and her niece, Agnes had a personal maid assigned to her, and all the servants were at her beck and call.

She had the use of the horses and carriage whenever she wanted. Her dresses, shawls, and bonnets came from the most fashionable milliners and mantuamakers in New Orleans and Natchez, and were charged to the household accounts, to be settled up at the end of the year, when all the plantation bills were paid, after the crop was in and sold. The poor dependent was wearing a new morning robe, in the latest style, Broderie Anglaise—opening down the front to show the flounced cambric

underskirt. On her head was a lacy cap, a rather coquettish little cap, Missy thought.

"I could have been mistress of a splendid establishment of my own," Agnes sighed.

According to her, heads had turned when she entered a room, women had been eaten with jealousy, men had surged around her, hearts and fortunes had been laid at her feet. Sifted down, there was probably a certain amount of truth in the recital, Missy decided, remembering bits of gossip. Her father had paid some attention to Aunt Agnes, until the younger sister had come on the scene. Dr. Frank Arden too had gone to Tanglewild "of an evening," before he had met the girl he had married. But no one had ever said Aunt Agnes had cared for either one, and she showed no signs of wearing the willow, why hadn't she married someone else?

Elderly and middle-aged men often said, "Miss Agnes was the handsomest young lady up and down the river." Her features had a classic regularity, her hands were white, her waist slim. The blond ringlets falling on either side of her face, though faded and streaked with gray, curled without any aid from papers or tongs, had once been a sparkling pale gold, like Roy's hair, the color you often hear of, and find described in novels, but seldom see. Yet, even as a girl, had Aunt Agnes ever been appealing? There was nothing in her face to stir your imagination.

"When do you suppose Dr. Baring intends to build a house of his own?" Missy asked, thinking her aunt resented his presence, and counting on her as an ally. "No style, no polish, and his whole career vague, very vague. Quite a comedown for poor Juliette!" had been her verdict when she had first met her sister's second husband. In defense of her mother, Missy had argued that his shy, countrified manner was an asset. When she had found out he was staying on at Cibola, Agnes had written to Missy: "*You feel as I do, I am sure—that it is a great mistake.*"

Now, instead of disparaging Baring, Agnes said, "Give the poor man time! He is busy getting established, building up his practice. That has to come first. He's doing very well. Everyone likes him."

"Do you like him, ma'am?" Missy had noticed how Aunt Agnes's manner to him, at first chilly, had thawed, but the girl had

supposed her aunt was disguising her real feelings, for reasons of her own.

"He's very pleasant company."

"I wouldn't call him good company. He's—platitudinous. You didn't like him at first, Aunt Agnes."

"Because I didn't know him."

"Do you like having him here all the time?"

"Why, I've grown used to him. Roy's away so much, so it's a good thing to have a man in the house."

"Isaiah's protection enough."

Isaiah was the butler and major-domo, in charge of the other servants. He was allowed to keep a loaded gun, and to live in a room behind the kitchen, to take care of the women and children when the men were away.

"I'm sure Mamma'd rather live in Natchez, in her own house."

"But of course she knows her husband's profession has to come first. Besides, she doesn't like to run a house. Certainly this one is a major undertaking." Agnes had veered back to familiar ground.

The ally Missy had counted on had deserted to the enemy.

"Since I'm not going back to school, I'll relieve you of the burden, and manage it myself."

Even when she had been a little girl, she had taken her mother's place on the plantation. The hands had learned to take their problems to her, rather than to the mistress, and she felt herself capable, at nineteen, of managing the house. The servants were well-trained, not raw field workers, but all of them had to be clothed, provided for, nursed through illnesses, and when they disagreed among themselves, someone had to make peace. Though her aunt saw to their material wants, they brought their troubles to Missy.

A strange expression of consternation came over Agnes's face. "Oh, no—I'm used to it—I don't need your help!"

Missy realized that since her father's death, while she had been away at school, and her mother had often been away, Aunt Agnes had become virtual mistress of the house. She had never taken any interest in the plantation, but the house had become her castle, and she wanted no interference with her rule.

"Even if you had more experience as a housekeeper, you are going to New Orleans this winter to make your debut."

Missy caught her eagerness, saw her nervous fingers plucking

at the feather quill in her pen. "I'm not going to New Orleans, ma'am. Or make any kind of formal debut. I'll go to parties and I'll give parties—country fashion—and live right here at home."

Agnes pursed her mouth, reminding Missy of someone eating green persimmons. "You're making a mistake to bury yourself here, Miranda." Her voice was crisply chill. "You'll regret it!" Her words sounded almost like a threat.

Missy felt the shock of her unexpected discovery. Her aunt wanted to get rid of her, and wanted Arnold Baring to stay! During her father's lifetime he had welded the family together as a unit. The different members of it had blended. Now all of them had become more unlike each other, more like themselves. As their opposing traits developed, they would inevitably clash.

Chapter Two

Halcyon was well named. It was a happy place, with no particular history. Cibola was an older plantation; the place and its owners had accumulated tales and legends. Missy looked out at the fields, waving to the hands hoeing the cotton. In the last few years, more land was being cleared, little settlements like St. Clair, four miles upriver, flourished and became towns. Families came earlier in the spring and lingered longer in the summer on their plantations before they went off to Europe, or the resorts. They reappeared in the fall, stayed until after Christmas, then vanished for the winter. Even in these more civilized days, Cibola was isolated for several months of the year, except for the family at Halcyon. In the old days, no one had lived at Halcyon, and the steamboats hadn't linked the plantations together, and to the rest of the world.

Except for the few years Ernest had spent with his cousins in the North, the Severadas had always lived at Cibola. Perhaps not entirely from choice, but because they had been at odds with the rudimentary civilization of a pioneer country. The first had been a swarthy Spaniard who had fled from his house on the

Natchez Trace to escape justice, or so people said. The family history became more authentic with the two half-brothers who were co-owners of the plantation. They had quarreled over it. One brother had been found on the floor, stabbed to death. The survivor had been Missy's great-grandfather.

From her father's description, she could picture the primitive little "crib" house—squared logs with frame over them, the logs showing through here and there. Part of it had been brick, like the house at Tanglewild, and the little houses in Natchez, built when Spain had owned the territory. The murdered man's blood had soaked into the floor boards. Nothing could remove the stain. "A table with a long fringed cloth hid it," her father had told her. "But it was there—I remember it, it was crescent-shaped, like a map of Cibola."

From her mammy, Aunt Dora, Missy had heard about her grandmother. The other Ana Miranda, unhappily married, had run away with her cousin, Alex Severada. When her husband had died, she had been able to marry Alex. Their child, Missy's father, had been nine years old when a cholera epidemic had swept away his parents within a few hours of each other. A number of the hands, and all of the servants had died too, except the boy's fifteen-year-old nurse.

Though the Ardens had owned Halcyon then, they had not been living there. There had been no family at Tanglewild, except the overseer's, and the Negro families, and the cholera had ravaged the whole countryside. Ernest's little nurse had taken charge of the plantation and the boy, until his cousins had come for him. After his education at a Northern university, and after he had made the Grand Tour, Ernest had come back to Cibola. He had always loved his nurse, had given her her freedom, gave her money, and when he had married, he built Dora a comfortable cabin just beyond the garden.

Because she had been their father's nurse, Roy and Missy had always thought of Aunt Dora as old. She was a tall woman, rather gaunt. Hard work had wrinkled her hands, but there were only a few deep lines in her face. Missy thought of the day before her father's death. Aunt Dora had come to sit with him. As usual, she had worn a red-patterned tignon tied Creole-fashion around her head. The gold hooped earrings Ernest had given her the previous Christmas had glittered against her ebony skin. Years of

"toting" baskets and bundles on her head had given her a straight back, a proud way of moving and holding herself, adding to her air of dignity.

That day she had brought Ernest a bunch of purple-red cockscombs, pale ribbon grass, and bright yellow canna lilies from her own yard. Somehow, in her hands, the strong clash of colors had taken on an odd and daring beauty. Missy had left her father and Aunt Dora together. They would not have talked much, they had not needed to—together they had shared memories and experiences no one else could share.

Aunt Dora, more than anyone alive, knew what had really happened at Cibola. Once Missy had asked her, "Was the old house haunted? Is that why Papa tore it all down and built this one?" Aunt Dora had answered, no, it wasn't the house that was haunted. As far as she could tell, it had no ghost in it, but a "hant" had followed Missy's great-grandfather. You could see it now and then—like a shadow within his shadow.

In the swamp, cotton sprouted out of the ground faster than elsewhere, grew bigger, produced more bolls, famous for quality. Fruit was more luscious, flowers glowed with brighter colors, trees were taller, animals, birds, and insects multiplied. But weeds flourished rank, and so did disease—in virulent forms. Besides the ever-present malaria, there was the dangerous swamp fever, often fatal, and dozens of other mysterious maladies. Everything in the swamp country was exaggerated, violent, extravagant, including the characteristics of the people who lived here.

In a sparsely settled wilderness, when crimes were committed, they might be discovered, but they were seldom solved. The slaves usually knew, but they never talked, except among themselves. In the past, and now, the law preferred not to interfere in "family matters." The plantations were still remote islands set in a sea of swamp. The three on the lake adjoined each other, and the three houses were relatively close together, yet who could prove what might or might not be going on in any one of them? Out of sight and hearing, behind closed doors and shutters, there could be tangled relationships, violent quarrels, even violent deaths. The swamp veiled secrets, past and future.

The carriage turned in Halcyon's gate. The house, built up on brick pillars, rambled without any pretense of architectural style. The Ardens had added rooms on as they needed them, but it all

blended comfortably. To one side, was a fenced-off garden, full of old-fashioned flowers. The dogs flung themselves around the carriage, in welcome, the gallery was deep in shade. The thorny rose vine looping around the posts at one end of it was covered with fluffy lemon-yellow roses. A pair of mockingbirds were flying back and forth, feeding their insistent nestlings hidden in the vine's thickest, thorniest meshes.

Missy closed her parasol and ran up the steps. Lucie Arden came out to meet her, kissed her, and exchanged good mornings with Cibola's coachman.

"Come in out of this heat, child."

Lucie led her into the sitting room behind the parlors, gave her a chair by the window, and a glass of cold lemonade. After Missy had finished reading the first act of *The Tempest*, they discussed it, then put the book aside to talk of everyday matters.

"You know, Aunt Lucie, I understand why Mamma wanted to marry again," Missy said, "Roy and I are grown. She was lonely, and disoriented—" She blamed herself for becoming annoyed with her mother this morning. "I suppose it's my fault if I'm prejudiced against this particular stepfather. Other people like him. You like him—"

"What I've seen of him. We've met fairly often since he's been at Cibola, but only in a group. When everybody else is talking, he keeps in the background."

There was something rather naïve in his looks and manners, making him seem younger than he was. He was a large, heavily built man, with sandy hair, beginning to turn gray, a wide, fresh-colored face, reddening easily, and an eager but bashful friendliness. His eyes crinkled at the corners first, before he smiled, and his smile came slowly, but once he had caught the point of any modest joke, he laughed over it a long time.

"Roy should have consulted you before he invited Dr. Baring to stay," Lucie said. "You have a right to your prejudices when it's a question of your own home." She thought Roy should have consulted Frank, who was his guardian.

"The words tripped off his tongue," Missy smiled. "As words do—before he weighs them." She added, "I'm not going to keep on grumbling to him about it."

As Lucie knew, Roy was headstrong and impulsive. His exu-

berance was part of his charm, but he was apt to leave other people entangled in the situations he had made for them.

"He gets on very well with Dr. Baring," Missy said.

"How do you get on with him?" Lucie asked.

"I'm polite to him."

"I know what that means!"

They both laughed. A smooth, flawless glaze of correct manners was a weapon "a true Southern gentlewoman" could develop and use with great effectiveness, setting up impenetrable barriers, creating unbridgeable distances. Very likely Baring saw his stepdaughter as a docile, rather colorless finishing-school product, and Lucie realized that was the impression Missy wanted him to get. Her soft voice, her quiet manner, and her looks gave no clue to her real character.

Missy was not a beauty, but the eye of the beholder, of a discerning beholder, would find her—alluring. A round face, a small turned-up nose, high-arched eyebrows darker than her hair, and a short, full upper lip gave an impression of softness; sometimes when she smiled her expression had a childish, little-girl charm. Her eyes were a clear, light gray, without a touch of blue or hazel, and though her coloring lacked the sparkle of Roy's fairness, there was the contrast, the subtle touch of exotic strangeness in light hair, a true ash blonde, and light eyes with her darker skin; that underlying warmth of amber, of gold, of olive duskiness inherited from her Spanish blood, along with her Creole grace. In the way she draped a shawl around her shoulders, or used a fan, or danced you saw a woman of Andalusia.

"This morning, when I told Aunt Agnes I wasn't going to New Orleans this winter, I found out something—she doesn't like me. She tries to, but she doesn't."

Through her childhood until now, Missy had taken her aunt's feelings for granted. Her aunt loved her, and she loved her aunt. It was the natural order of things. Recently she had become aware of the complexities of family life at Cibola. The pattern had dissolved, and was taking new and disconcerting shapes. She expected Lucie to tell her she was mistaken.

Instead, Lucie showed no surprise. "When you were a little girl, running wild over the plantation, it was easier for her. Now she's probably afraid you'll interfere with her methods of running the house."

That was only part of it, Lucie thought. Roy offered no challenge. He was a lordly male, to be flattered, deferred to and wheedled. The "young master" was careless, lavish—a valuable ally for Agnes. Her niece had become another woman, in a sense a rival, the center of interest, attention, and speculation. She had everything Agnes had always wanted.

"Knowing won't influence my behavior to her. She can't help it," Missy said. "But after all these years, she ought to know who's the real boss."

Lucie knew she meant Aunt Dora. At Cibola, all of the Negroes had been born on the place. The servants had grown up under Aunt Dora's vigilant eye. She was mother, sister, grandmother, aunt or sister-in-law to the whole group. Before Ernest's marriage, she had established her matriarchy and it had gone on flourishing ever since. As Agnes had no personal fondness for the servants, or they for her, she never caught the drift of the subsurface currents either in the house or on the plantation.

"I hope she hasn't hurt your feelings, child," Lucie said.

"She would have—once—but I can't very well indulge in wounded sensibilities, because I've found out I don't like her either." Afraid Lucie might be somewhat shocked by the admission, she added. "But I'm not going to let her know it." She knew her aunt was jealous of her, and it was much easier to endure someone else's jealousy than to be the one to feel it.

"You can afford to be generous." Lucie was glad Missy was never petty. Her feelings were on a large scale. She was capable of hating, but would not descend to giving little jabs. "And perhaps it's just as well to know where you stand."

Most women didn't like Agnes; she was apt to ignore them if they were unimportant, or resent them if they were. But Lucie wondered why Agnes, dependent on Missy and Roy, and knowing on which side her bread was buttered, had let Missy see so much of the truth, when prudence indicated she should hide it. Agnes was both expedient and adept, not only at hiding her feelings but at pretending to have them when they were nonexistent. Missy could conceal hers, but she never pretended to be fond of anyone unless she was.

"Do you think Dr. Baring's good company?" Missy asked suddenly.

"I've never tried, but somehow I can't imagine carrying on a conversation with him and no one else to help out," Lucie answered. "Why?"

"Aunt Agnes says he is."

This time, Lucie was startled. She too remembered the remarks Agnes had made about him, and though lately her manner to him had seemed more cordial, Lucie supposed Agnes was putting on a spurious mellowness for some reason of her own. He was genial to her, to everyone, but his good qualities were not likely to appeal to her. She reserved her admiration for men of the world, rich, successful, fashionable men, not homespun types.

"Are you sure you understood her?"

Missy repeated what her aunt had said about Baring.

"You see, her viewpoint has shifted. She wants him at Cibola. He doesn't talk much, but he listens. I think he takes in more than he seems to—and what he does say, though it's dull, always flatters people."

"He doesn't flatter me, beyond the usual polite nothings," Lucie said. "But I suppose he does, in a way, he admires your Uncle Frank to me—"

Missy smiled. "He's found out you'd rather hear Uncle Frank's praises sung than hear your own."

Lucie admitted it. Evidently Arnold Baring had taken the trouble to conquer Agnes's original hostility, and had succeeded. He had found out how to flatter her, indicating he was shrewd enough to understand her and play up to her. Then he wasn't so simple and unsophisticated as he seemed. Had everyone drawn mistaken conclusions through no fault of his? Or had he assumed a pose deliberately? If so, what kind of a person was he?

After Missy left, Lucie changed from the blue and white gingham, the apron she had worn, and her simple muslin cap, to a thin flowered organdie dress. It was plain, but cut lower in the neck, and instead of the narrow linen collar, it was finished with a bertha. She omitted the apron, and added a locket. Though it was only four o'clock in the afternoon, this was known in local language as "dressing for the evening," indicating that the mistress of a well-run house had finished, barring emergencies, her domestic duties for the day, and had put aside her plain sewing. She now had the leisure to sit on the gallery, armed with a large

palmetto fan, her fancy work, or a novel, waiting for her men folk to come in, ready to receive any chance guests who might drop by.

Lucie preferred reading to embroidering endless yards of scallops for petticoats. She picked up her book, but it failed to hold her attention. Her thoughts wandered to Cibola and the people living there. She had heard Ernest's will read and discussed so often she felt she could recite its provisions by heart. He had left his widow what the lawyers called a "very handsome settlement," giving her a big allowance, besides her valuable jewelry, and a house in Natchez, now rented, but he had tied up the capital. Juliette couldn't touch it; in fact, nobody could touch it.

Cibola was divided equally between Roy and Missy. Roy also had property in New Orleans and a plantation outside of Natchez, equal in value to Tanglewild, which Ernest had left to Missy. As he had explained to her, Louisiana law worked to a woman's advantage when it came to an inheritance. Her husband would have no right to anything she inherited from a parent, either before or after marriage. He had also left her stocks and bonds, invested up North, so she wouldn't be entirely dependent on land. Cotton was selling high now, but cotton was a "gamblin' game." If either Roy or Missy should die without issue, his or her property and money reverted to the survivor. If both should die during their mother's lifetime, leaving no heirs, everything would go to her.

Ernest had warned Roy against extravagance, and he had warned Missy, "No matter how fine a man you marry, how much you trust him, keep what I leave you in your own hands." He had done all he could to keep his family safe. As long as his children were under age, guardians and lawyers could keep a watchful care of their property and of them. Soon Missy and Roy would be in full control. Roy would be twenty-one next March. Then he would be free to depend on himself. He would have to keep the fortune or throw it away. Missy could be trusted to hold on to her share of the land when she came of age, but there were other dangers besides being poor. Roy was impetuous, but of the two, Missy was the one to be involved in emotional turmoils, the danger waiting for people with intense depths of feeling. Nobody could make her or Roy safe. Lucie

remembered what Agnes had said to her sister on Juliette's wedding day: "Of course there's nothing to that superstition people have about Cibola's being unlucky. I hope it'll never bring you bad luck!"

The carriage took Missy back to Cibola. Clouds of dust rose and settled, powdering the leaves and grass by the road. Missy dressed and joined her mother and aunt, who were sitting on the gallery, waiting for Roy. The three women sat in a row, the flounces of their thin dresses making circles of pale tinted foam around them. Juliette and Agnes rocked back and forth, slowly moving large palmetto-leaf fans to stir the burning air and to discourage the mosquitoes, though neither of them admitted there were any such insects on Cibola's gallery.

Missy neither rocked nor fanned. She never denied the mosquitoes existed, even at Cibola, and had set burning joss sticks near her chair to keep them off. Her mother and aunt wore green veils over their faces to protect their complexions from the glare, though there was none, as she had pointed out when the others asked her why she didn't use her veil. The gallery faced east and was in deep shade. Juliette and Agnes were arguing about the probable arrival of the steamboat, something nobody could predict with any accuracy, and complaining about the breathless heat, which nobody could do anything about. Missy stopped listening to them. She loved the summer, and was looking out at the glitter of the lake through the trees, enjoying the blazing afternoon. Rays of fiery light stabbed through the smoky shadows, the dry scraping chorus of katydids never ceased, and farther away, by the lake, the frogs had their own chorus.

The *Great Mogul* blew for Tanglewild Landing, the sound reverberating through the drowsy afternoon, its echoes lingering a long time, faintly melancholy. The carriage set out. After a while, it came back. Roy's hand, in a primrose-colored glove, was waving, then he leaned halfway out of the carriage. His pale gilt hair sparkled in the sun, his face was brown from the sun, with a touch of color in his cheeks. He called to his frenzied dogs, smiled at the welcoming women on the gallery.

The usual fanfare surrounded him. Dogs whined and barked, servants eddied out to take his baggage. Juliette and Agnes rustled to the edge of the gallery, and Missy flew down the steps to

meet the carriage. Roy kissed her, patted the jostling dogs, hailed the women on the gallery, and gave directions for the stabling, feeding, and currying of the stallion he had bought and brought back on the boat with him. Wild shouts and cries announced the stallion had reached Cibola. Roy laughed at the commotion.

"What sort of devil have you brought back?" Missy asked, "And look at you—dressed up like a steamboat gambler!"

"Latest thing—" Roy took the steps two at a time, and submitted to the raptures of his mother and aunt. His trousers were strapped below the instep, his vivid green jacket was decorated with scrolls of frogging and silver buttons, his waistcoat was satin, and he was carrying a sword cane with a gold top. Answering questions about his trip upriver, he said he still preferred the *Elcipse's* quail in aspic, but the chef on the *Great Mongul* had a superb touch with *vol-au-vent*. Laughing at his airs, Missy said she required corn bread and potlicker on her menus. Roy began to describe the fine points of his stallion, son of a famous sire, bought at a bargain price because of a bad reputation. "He was too much for his last owner—"

Juliette murmured, "That sounds like a dangerous animal!"

"Now Mamma, you know I can ride any horse!"

Agnes praised his spirit.

When the family went into tea later, Roy had changed into linen clothes, and Arnold Baring had come in. He beamed at everyone and seemed delighted that Roy was home again. When her mother was at Cibola, Missy always insisted on putting her at the head of the table, giving her the place of mistress of the house. Roy sat at the foot of the table, as master. Isaiah was stately in his stiff white butler's jacket, keeping a sharp eye on the two houseboys, and on their little brother, a tiny, quick, black child named Adolphus, but always called Gnat. Sometimes, in hot weather, he had the privilege of coming in the dining room to stand still and pull the cord of the big wooden punkah over the table, making it swing back and forth. His real duty was to clean and polish the boots, an endless task here in the country where men went booted all day long.

During tea, Roy gave an account of visit to the New Orleans cousins, and asked what had happened at home during his absence. After he had gathered the news, and mentioned his plans for the rest of the summer, he said he had invited dozens of

people to visit, he didn't know how many. "We'll see when they show up."

Later, Baring said he had just had a bit of good news. "Philip's finished at the university with a mighty fine record."

He often spoke of this nephew of his, the only member of his family he ever mentioned. He had kept up with Philip, had helped the boy with his education, he admitted modestly, as the family was poor, and now seemed delighted because his nephew had justified his hopes. Missy carried politeness far enough to congratulate her stepfather. The others were more exuberant.

"What's he going to do with himself, sir?" Roy asked.

"This summer he's tutoring the younger brother of a friend of his. After Christmas, he'll teach in a boy's school, somewhere in Indiana. It's a small town, and a small school, but the pay's pretty good, and both school and town are growing fast. The only trouble is, there's a gap between September and January, but I guess Philip can find a position to fill in the time. I wish he'd find something nearby this fall, I'd like to take a look at him before he goes out West."

"How long has it been since you've seen him, Uncle Arnold?" Roy asked.

"Why, I never have—we've never met. We know each other only through letters. Mostly his to me, I'm not much of a correspondent."

"Think of that!" Juliette said.

"You certainly must arrange to meet," Agnes said. "It would mean so much to Philip."

"And to me." Baring's face took on a rather wistful expression, if such a wide face could look wistful. "I'd like to find some way before long, but I don't like to leave my practice just yet, when I'm making a start. Though once Philip is off to Indiana, there's no telling when we'll have a chance to see each other."

"Why should you leave?" Roy broke in. "Let Philip come here this fall, in September—pay you a visit. Pay us all a visit. He could stay on through the Christmas holidays."

Baring demurred, turned red, was grateful, said Roy must not bother about Philip—he had his own friends to invite, the house would be crowded . . . Roy cut short Baring's objections. Agnes urged the visit, Juliette chimed in now and then.

Roy plunged on. "We'll write and ask him, before he ties himself up for the fall. The thing's as good as done!"

In the hubbub, Missy didn't think anyone noticed her silence, though Roy did give her a glance to see how she was taking it.

Little Joe, waiting on the table, heard every word of the discussion. After tea, the cook sent him to Aunt Dora's cabin to take his grandma a ham hock and a wedge of blackberry pie. He went through the garden—the cabin was just across the road from the side garden. Her wooden shutters were closed and bolted but, as it was not yet sundown, her door was open and she was on her porch, prodding at the roots of her ferns and begonias with an old tin fork. She thanked Joe for the gifts. He took them inside, and came back to talk to her. Her black tomcat, curled up on the steps, watched the birds flying to roost. Little Joe repeated all he had heard to his grandma. She sat down, lighted her pipe, and listened in silence, her eyes following the windings of the road as far as she could see. The right-hand fork led to the graveyard on a low Indian mound where Ernest Severada was buried with his family.

Aunt Dora took the pipe out of her mouth. "Seems like I mos' hear Mr. Ernest sayin' he don't want Dr. Barin' nor none of Dr. Barin's kin in his house."

It was the next day before Missy had a chance to see Roy in private. She waylaid him as he was starting for the stables. He couldn't resist showing off the black stallion. "Come along, I'll put him through his paces."

Missy had learned to know Roy better than anyone else did, maybe better than anyone else ever would. It's hard to fool a little sister. Because he knew he couldn't fool her, he had always had a certain respect for her opinion, had set store by her chary praise. She was in a critical mood now, but had made up her mind to be tactful.

"Did you hear about Mr. Moss losing Azalea? In one evening! He gambled for high stakes." She wondered how anyone could be carried away by the artificial excitement of numbers and faces painted on bits of pasteboard. Cotton planting was always a gamble, but it was real.

"At least a dozen times coming up on the boat," Roy said, "poor Moss had an infernal run of luck, but he didn't show the

white feather. He took his loss without turning a hair. Everybody admires his spirit."

"Admire him? For throwing away Azalea? If he were my husband I'd be tempted to put a bullet through his empty skull!"

Roy looked shocked at her violence. "Didn't the time you spent at finishing school getting curried teach you the ways of the world?"

"I can think for myself." She realized Roy had ranged himself with the majority, leaving her isolated.

"You're a tight-fisted little devil—" he said.

She stopped moving and faced him.

"Oh, I didn't mean you're stingy—"

"Then take it back."

"All right—but you didn't let me finish. All you want is to bury yourself on the plantation and make a cotton crop. You're a back-swamp barbarian at heart." He was half-teasing, half-serious.

"That's exactly what I want." She remembered the original meaning of barbarian was stranger. Roy was looking at her as if she had become strange to him. "And just because you've spent a few weeks swaggering around New Orleans, you needn't be so biggity, Young Massa."

Bright color flared in Roy's cheeks, showing he was annoyed. She walked on, and so did he. It was not in his nature to nurse his anger, and he smiled at her out of turquoise eyes.

"Cheer up! When I'm out of leading strings I won't gamble away my share of Cibola if that's what's worrying you."

Roy was proud of Cibola, and loved it. He loved her, she knew, but he took everything more lightly than she did. If his way of loving lacked the intensity of hers, it was a matter of temperament, and very likely he was lucky not to care so much . . . violent emotions made trouble.

"I know how you feel about Papa, and Papa's house," Roy spoke seriously, then he smiled at her. "But besides that you are rather a prickly pear about Cibola."

"I guess I am," she admitted, renewing her vow to be tactful, to avoid quarreling with him either about their stepfather, or their stepfather's nephew. "But I'm a Severada—they buried themselves in the woods and were different from other people."

"Well, I'm a Severada too."

"You're diluted."

"I was a little hasty about asking what's his name—Philip—but you saw how delighted Uncle Arnold is about it. I can't be an Indian giver and take back the invitation."

"You have a right to ask any guest you want here." She emphasized "guest." At least the nephew's visit would be limited. He would have to go and teach in Indiana.

Roy flicked at a bush with his riding whip, breaking off a rose with several buds attached to it.

"Just look at you!"

Roy began to laugh. "There! What'd I tell you!"

Missy laughed too. "I'm thinking about Silas this time. You know how touchy he is about his roses."

Silas was the head gardener, one of Aunt Dora's brothers, a thin, crumpled man, a little lame in one foot.

"Give it to me, Roy, before he comes along and mourns over it."

"There are thousands in bloom. He can't miss one."

"Four. One rose, three buds." She held up the flower Roy had picked from the path where it had fallen and handed to her. "He counts them."

"So do you," Roy teased her. "Don't you think it's an act of charity to have that poor devil of a Philip here? Let him have a good time before the prison walls of a dreary school close around him."

"A woman might have to teach, but a man doesn't—there are all kinds of other ways a man can earn a living. So, Philip must want to teach, or he would choose something else."

"I suppose so. You ought to like him then. You always have your nose in a book when you're in the house. You should take to a bookworm."

"I don't know—I've never met a young man bookworm. You want me to like him so I'll take him off your hands if he's a bore. Maybe I do feel a little sorry for him."

Missy did feel sorry for the mysterious Philip. Not because he was poor and would have to earn his living by teaching, but because she pictured him as small, stoop-shouldered, and nervous, like a silverfish coming out of the pages of some thick volume nobody has read in a long time. How would he fit in

with Roy's group of friends? Would he be able to keep their pace of hunting, riding, dancing, and flirting?

"That's a good gal," Roy patted her hand. "We won't be like Catwoods, will we?"

The Catwoods were a brother and sister who, together, had inherited a plantation and an ugly house. They had quarreled, and though they still ran the plantation, they had divided the house by taking off the upper story, moving it to a pasture, and leaving the lower story, each living in half of a house.

Missy laughed. "No, let's not be like them."

The shadow of stepfather, his nephew, or Cibola could never come between Roy and herself. She thought of her own family's history, and of the two brothers who had quarreled over Cibola. To herself she added silently, "We won't be like Severadas either."

Chapter Three

Philip accepted the invitation, but explained he could not come until October. When he arrived, Missy was away from home on a house party, then spent another week visiting her friends in and around Natchez. By the time she boarded the *Eclipse* to go back to Cibola, Philip had already been there several days. No one had written to her to tell her what kind of impression he was making, or how he fitted in with Roy's activities. Soon she would see for herself.

After the crop was in, the men went hunting. Hounds bayed, horns sounded, the huntsmen gathered before sunup, and galloped off, vanishing in the early morning mists. If they were on a wolf hunt or bear hunt, they were usually gone a week or more, setting up their camp deep in the swamp. When they reappeared, they gathered at dinner parties, soirées, hunt balls and hunt breakfasts, staying up until another dawn to dance, feast, sing, and flirt. As Thanksgiving drew near, families assembled in the country. At the plantation houses, all kinds of entertainments

gathered momentum to reach a frenzy of comings and goings, a constant round of festivity during the Christmas holidays. After Twelfth-night, most of the planters and their families went to Natchez, Vicksburg, and New Orleans. The plantation houses in the swamp were deserted, and the plantations settled into their winter somnolence until it was time to plow and plant again.

In the fall, the steamboats were loaded with people, and packed with masses of cotton bales. Missy stayed on deck, watching the shore line. A planter from above Vicksburg noticed her, and said to his daughters, "Now there's a quiet, ladylike girl—the one standing by the rail, in gray."

Her traveling dress, her cloak, her hat, the tip of her shoe, and the round muff she held were all in the same shade of soft dove gray. The brim of her hat cast a shadow over the upper part of her face, giving her a touch of mystery, reminding him of the charming faces he remembered from his young days when girls had looked out from the becoming frame of poke bonnets. He had no use for the newfangled headgear women wore now, scraps of things pushed far back on their heads.

His daughters laughed at his innocence when he said, "There's nothing showy about her." Long before he had noticed Missy, they had taken in every detail of her appearance, particularly her hat. They thought it rather unusual and daring to wear a hat in winter instead of a bonnet. Here was something that breathed of Paris. The smoky ostrich plume curling around the brim was strategically placed. The border of her cloak and her muff were chinchilla. "If you had to pay the bills for her ladylike simplicity, Papa, your hair would stand straight on end," his youngest daughter told him.

"She can pay for it," the eldest said. "I know who she is—Miranda Severada of Cibola plantation."

The undulations in the river bank were familiar to Missy now. The *Eclipse* was passing Tanglewild Reach. The weather was clear, and on deck, chilly. It was after sundown, and in the afterglow, the cypresses were rusty red against the sky, the shadows were steely, the earth was a heavy brown. The swamp was sketched in a thousand faint crisscross strokes, dissolving in the coming dusk. With its windows lighted, the *Eclipse* took on a bright fragile unreality, glittering like a fanciful toy, a contrast to the large, solemn landscape, the deep, cold river.

Missy saw the carriage waiting at the landing, saw Roy standing at the edge of the bank, someone else standing beside him, a tall figure in a dark cape. His height, the pose of his head, the swing of his cape were sharply silhouetted against the blur of trees behind him. This was her first glimpse of Philip.

The *Eclipse* pulled into the landing. Missy went ashore, with Rosie trailing after her, carrying the jewel case. Little Joe and Gus came running to take charge of bags, trunks, and portmanteaus. Roy kissed his sister, then introduced Philip to her. Putting her gloved hand in his, she welcomed him to Cibola. She looked at him, and was startled, unbelieving. The lantern light showed her an oval face, thick dark hair, and long dark eyes, brilliantly dark, as he smiled and spoke. She seemed to hear a particular warmth in his voice, sensed a quick response and recognition in a first glance. Her impressions came either from her own imagination, deluded by some trick of the wavering lantern flame, or he could not be Philip Baring. A stranger had come, masquerading as her stepfather's nephew. As he handed her into the carriage, she asked, "Are you really Philip?"

Roy laughed. "Who else could he be?"

Missy knew who Philip was. Cross the gypsy fortuneteller's palm with silver, and she will cut the battered deck of cards, turn them, study them. Maybe they fall into complex patterns, odd combinations. The sly gypsy never reveals everything she sees in the tarots, but she will always whisper, "A handsome stranger is coming into your life—coming soon."

In the dimness of the carriage, Missy listened to Philip, made the right answers, but disguised as ordinary conversation, he was saying to her, "Here we are—the two of us. We've met at last." As the tarots have decreed, as the gypsy promised.

At the house, Missy flew to her room to change her traveling clothes. She put on a new dress, one she particularly liked, and had been hoarding for a special occasion. Did one guest make an occasion? Philip was standing in the hall, smiling at her as she came down the steps. He said, "I was waiting for you." Tea was much later than usual, and lasted longer, since everyone lingered at the table talking. Philip had the knack of drawing people out. Missy noticed he said "Aunt Juliette," and "Aunt Agnes." He discussed parties, people, fashions, and manners with them, teasing them a little, making them laugh and preen them-

selves. He had been to Halcyon, he had been hunting, and he had met a group of Roy's friends. Roy was a leader, not a follower, but he seemed to fall in with the tastes and opinions Philip expressed, and evidently enjoyed his company.

Arnold Baring beamed with pride. Though Missy knew she could never bring herself to like him, she found herself thinking of him with tolerance. Maybe he was lazy, but then a great many pleasant, kindly people were; perhaps they were agreeable because they enjoyed idleness. Violent energy, driving ambitions sharpened wits, but sometimes sharpened tongues, and made tensions. She wondered if Philip was ambitious; he had a smooth ease of manner, but that was surface; she didn't think he seemed placid. How different he was from his uncle, in every way! Even in her present mood, when she was trying to be fair to him, her stepfather looked to her a little clumsy and out of place at this table.

But Philip looked as if he belonged here. He was suited to damask and brocade, wax candles, silver candelabra, polished mahogany, the bouquet of fine wines. Perhaps he seemed pale because his eyes were much darker than his brown hair, almost black, and almond-shaped, harmonizing with the structure of his oval face. They were expressive eyes, shining bright when he talked and smiled and listened, though sometimes she caught a shadow of melancholy in their glance, and she thought she saw indications of a high-strung temperament in the sensitive lines of his mouth.

After tea, when the family had gathered in the parlor, Agnes asked him for a little music. He went in the back parlor, where the small piano was, and played the songs and tunes Agnes and Juliette liked, then turned to Missy. "What shall I play for you?"

Picking up the book of Etudes, she turned the pages, showing him what she had chosen. "This one, if you know it."

"It's my favorite too."

Again, she caught the flash of appreciation, response, and recognition between them, somehow enhancing her sense of the rightness of her tastes, her choices.

In the morning, she found Philip sketching the front of the house. "Come take a look," he invited. She watched as he drew. With a few deft strokes, columns, gallery, doors, and windows

took shape on the paper. To her eyes, he had as sure a touch with a pencil as he had on the piano keys.

"You make drawing look easy to do," she said. "You don't rub out, or mutter about perspective, or squint or tear your hair."

"This part is easy. Wait until I start using water colors, and try to catch the lights and shades."

He would not be able to begin using his paints today. Roy was taking him up the river to the Markham plantation, where they would spend the night, and at dawn, go off to the swamp to hunt.

"I wish you were coming with us," Philip said. "At least as far as the Markhams—we would have that much of your company."

"I hate the idea of hunting," she said, "and killing wild animals you don't need to eat."

"It's not one of my enthusiasms either," Philip smiled at her. "We see eye to eye about everything, don't we?"

Missy realized what she had been feeling here at home—a kind of loneliness, an apartness, even from her own brother, with the result that she had become guarded, reserved in her dealings with everyone in the house except the servants. Not really secretive with Roy, she could flare up and speak her mind to him, but on some subjects she had to be careful not to start a quarrel. Then too, she and Roy were different in their tastes, attitudes, and traits.

It was strange to find this young man she had just met drawing her into bonds of mutual understanding, shared tastes and sympathies. Stranger yet, he was Arnold Baring's nephew. She had almost forgotten the tie between Philip and her stepfather. Recalling it made her more wary.

"We'll find bones of contention as we go along."

"I don't believe it. If I could stay and exchange points of view I could prove I'm right!"

"No, we need to find some bones—and have a few spiny arguments, or we'll be like flies drowning in molasses—" She was sorry to catch sight of Roy, coming toward them, ready to go.

Roy and Philip came back with their plans made for another excursion up the river. This time, there would be no hunting. The Markhams were inviting a group of girls and young men to an informal dancing party. They would all spend the night at

the house. The next day, they would all ride over to Bill's new plantation and have a picnic. Missy was eager to go.

"I want to see the place anyway. It's not a real plantation yet," she explained to Philip. "It's a piece of land Bill's father has given him. He's clearing it, and is going to build on it, and live there."

"He wants to show you the spot he's picked out for his house," Roy said, "and wants to know if you girls will approve of his ideas for it."

Missy pictured the hours on the steamboat, the gaiety at the informal supper and dance, then the picnic. A plantation always interested her, and she was anxious to see Bill's property, but most of all, she thought of talking to Philip, dancing with him, riding with him. She would have him to herself, free of the surveillance of the older people. While he was away from them, he would not have to put time and effort into pleasing her aunt and his uncle. Missy was glad Philip took pains to interest and amuse her mother. As to the others, perhaps he liked their company. It was natural for him to be fond of "Uncle Arnold," and of Aunt Agnes too, since she only showed her most agreeable side to Philip. Also, he had come to a place he didn't know, to be among people he didn't know, and was taking pains to win approval. With a group of young people he would be more relaxed, more his real self than when he was with his elders. The next few days, Missy felt, would give her the opportunity to find out if she and Philip were as congenial as they seemed to be.

Not that she would have him to herself, when a flock of girls were converging on him, and at the sight of him would marshal all their weapons, but there was zest in competition. She went out on the gallery. The apricot haze of the afterglow had promised more good weather, and now in the darkening sky the quarter moon had a polished brightness, a definite outline, with sharp shiny horns to its crescent.

"There you are, moon-gazing, lost in a dream," Philip said as he came up to her.

"Gazing, but not dreaming. I'm measuring how large a slice of the moon we'll have tomorrow night, and the next night."

"Enough. This time I'm even willing to leave Cibola—you'll be along."

"So will other girls—the cream of the crop from Natchez and

Vicksburg," she answered, deliberately ignoring the meaning in his tone.

"Why import them?" he asked.

"The young men over here cross the river, scale the bluffs and do their courting on the other side, but it works out very well, because the young men over there descend the bluffs, cross the river and blaze trails through the swamp to do their courting on this side. Then everybody joins forces for parties. We always have a good time at the Markhams. Of all Roy's friends, I believe I like Bill best."

"Of the ones I've met, so do I," Philip agreed, "though he's rather serious and literal-minded."

"He's a sobersides, that's the beauty of him for Roy. He can't lead Bill by the nose the way he does the others."

"Bill is always singing your praises," Philip smiled. "You're the one who could lead him by the nose—"

Bill Markham would have fallen in love with her, Missy knew, if she had given him any encouragement, but she had diverted his incipient emotions into friendship, and now he was in love with her friend, Sara Dent.

"Not I, someone else—" she said truthfully. "You'll see—she'll be there."

"But I doubt if she was his first choice."

"Since he's twenty-three, I'm sure she wasn't. Don't most young men have a Rosaline or two—maybe a dozen—before they ever meet Juliet?"

"Not if they meet Juliet first."

Missy turned to go back in the house. "Maybe they had better stick to a Rosaline. Juliet was an unlucky find."

In the thin light from the moon, Philip's face looked wan and ivory, with dark shadows around his eyes. "Very unlucky." Slanted moonrays touched his face, glittered in his eyes, giving them a cold, eerie glitter. "But inevitable."

The expedition fulfilled Missy's expectations. Everything combined to make it all an unqualified success, including a waxing moon at night, and an unclouded sun by day. The fine weather lasted until she and Philip and Roy were back at Cibola. The day after their return, the sunlight was fitful, threatening change. Missy saw Philip at his painting, trying to catch sudden dazzling

light flowing and fading into shadow. His brush would have to be quick to fix the effect in his water color of the house. She was tempted to join him, and went as far as the front door. He looked up, and seemed to be searching for some glimpse of her. He could not see her, she was too far within the shadows of the open door. His look summoned her out.

She hesitated, restless, yet feeling a sense of anticlimax. Instead of going on, she turned and went out of the house by another door, taking one of the paths through the back garden, walking fast. When she reached the road winding around the edge of the lake, she followed it beyond the limits of the garden. Someday, she would wander here with Philip, show him aspects of Cibola he had not seen yet. No, she thought, she would not bring him this far. Somehow, she felt, he would prefer a stroll to the summerhouse.

He didn't belong here, where the lake narrowed and resumed its own character, its wildness. He wouldn't see it with her eyes. She had already found out that he was not interested in primitive things and places. Out in the water, invisible from the shore, was a little dab of an island, where the egrets nested every summer. In her childhood, she had been sure it was enchanted, because it seemed to disappear when she rowed away from it. It still kept some of its enchanted quality in her memory of long summer days when she and Roy and the colored children had played house there. Now it belonged to the egrets and to her, not to anyone else.

That evening, when Missy went into the parlor just before teatime, only Aunt Agnes and Philip were in the room. He had finished his water color and was showing it to her, looking pleased at her praise. "My favorite view of the house!"

"If you like it, Aunt Agnes, do let me give it to you."

She thanked him, and said she would hang it in her room.

Seeing Missy, Philip turned his painting. "What do you think of it?"

"You've managed your light and shade remarkably well."

She was annoyed with him for giving the water color to her aunt. Did he think Miss Agnes Snowe was mistress of Cibola? Immediately, Missy despised herself for her pettiness. Philip proved he had good manners by offering tribute to an older

woman. Aunt Agnes, flattered and basking, was much easier to live with than Aunt Agnes in a bad humor.

Philip smiled at Missy. "You ladies have turned my head and made me ambitious—now I'm bold enough to want to try to do your portrait."

"You won't have time, I'm afraid, too many hunts and parties are already scheduled."

"We can find a few hours here and there," he urged.

"You can put your easel and paints in the morning room, and work there where no one will disturb you," Agnes offered, proving what headway he had made in her good graces. "Philip is remarkably versatile, isn't he, Miranda?"

"Very—" Missy suddenly understood the core of her resentment. Philip was too versatile. If he not only liked but admired such a person as Aunt Agnes as warmly as he seemed to, somehow Missy felt that it took away from his liking and admiration for her. Of course he hardly knew Aunt Agnes yet. Then he should wait, be more reserved and more selective in his enthusiasms. Perhaps she had given him too much credit for a finely whetted fastidiousness, and had overestimated his quickness to penetrate the disguises people assumed.

There was another possibility—he might not feel quite as much affection and admiration as he pretended, and was pretending because he had something to gain . . . No! She didn't believe that! Charm, like talent, was a gift. Some people had it, and the majority lacked it.

A steady downpour began during the night, an autumnal spell of rainy weather. Roy gave up a project for taking Philip to Natchez, but as he soon grew bored indoors he offered a ride to St. Clair or a little shooting in the woods as a substitute.

"Come along, Philip, we can't stay penned up until it stops—the weather prophets say it's set in."

Philip begged off from the ride. "This is a perfect opportunity to begin the portrait, if I can persuade Miranda to pose for an hour or so. Please wear the dress you had on the first evening we met."

"You can trust Philip's tastes in women's clothes," Roy said to her.

"She can trust her own," Philip answered. "Like a Parisienne,

she knows what suits her—she has a subtle and individual elegance of her own."

Missy laughed, wondering what Philip would think of her elegance if he ever caught her after she had been on a wild gallop through the thickest part of the woods. Often, she came back looking like a scarecrow and plastered with mud. In the freedom of her solitary rides and rambles, she reverted to type.

The morning room, behind the library, was misnamed, since no one ever came near it before noon. In fact, the family seldom used it at any time. During parties, flirtatious couples wandered in, generally to find that some other flirtatious pair had already pre-empted it. There was a formal charm to the pale gray paneling, the satinwood desk, the silvery ashes of roses hangings, and the Sèvres ornaments. Philip posed Missy in an armchair, and began work.

"You're a good subject," he told her. "You don't move an eyelash."

Because she had always wanted to see and share as much as she could of the wary life going on in the woods, at the edge of the lake and the river, she had learned the absolute stillness wild animals know. Watching Philip as he began to sketch, she thought he would be a good subject for a portrait. A minor artist could reproduce the oval of his face, and the dimensions of his features. His nose was slightly aquiline, his eyes were deep-set, but his expression was always changing, reflecting a dozen variations of mood. It would take an expert portrait painter to bring Philip's face to life on canvas.

"You and your uncle must have learned to know each other by letter," Missy said.

"He helped me with my education, so of course I had good reason to be grateful to him, but I could hardly say I knew him at all. His letters were short and sparse, hardly more than statements of fact. Some people don't have the knack of conveying anything about themselves in their letters."

"But you wouldn't be tongue-tied with pen and paper," she said.

"No, that's true. Mine to him were much fuller. I gave him all my news in detail, but still, as I'd never seen Uncle Arnold, I suppose I wrote with a certain amount of formality." Philip was frowning a little as he outlined Missy's head and shoulders.

The polite letters of a dutiful nephew, she thought, but words on paper always reveal something, even if only negatively. The account Philip had given of his whereabouts, his progress had given his uncle some picture of him, then handwriting, and the way he expressed himself would be enough to convince Baring that his nephew had not only acquired an education, but social graces.

"I sent him a rough portrait of myself," Philip said. "A sketch I drew and colored."

"Portrait of the artist as a young man," Missy smiled.

Baring had extolled his nephew's learning, she remembered, but had never said that Philip was unusually handsome. She wondered if Baring would have been so eager to have Philip here if he hadn't already been sure he was eminently presentable. His uncle had helped him to get an education, but Philip had made the most of his chances.

"While you were studying, you must have made friends at the university. You didn't bury your nose in your books all the time."

She was curious to know where he had learned the skills Roy and his friends had absorbed from their way of life, riding, hunting, dancing, ease of manner.

"Oh, I made friends," Philip said. "They invited me to their houses for the holidays. Then every summer, I had pupils to tutor, and was lucky in the families I met that way, though I've never met such hospitable, warmhearted people as I have down here."

"Warmhearted, and hotheaded."

"But you understand the art of living in this part of the world, you know how to enjoy yourselves," he said.

"I suppose we learned from the colored people. They make the most of their good times whenever they have a chance."

"And I'd better make the most of mine," Philip said. "I try not to think of what looms ahead for me."

"Don't you want to teach?" she asked.

"How could I want to leave Cibola? It's the earthly paradise."

Cibola had welcomed him, accepted him, but she wondered if his stay here was good for him. She could imagine how easily doors had opened to Philip. He had made friends, some of them rich, before he had met Roy. At first, Philip must have imitated

them, then equalled, then surpassed them, until they could take him as a pattern. He even managed to impress Roy. Maybe Philip had learned the habits of an easy luxurious world too thoroughly, along with worldly tastes. He seemed inclined to feel sorry for himself because he had to work for a living.

"Compare a schoolroom crowded with boys at their most ungainly, and this room, with you in it."

The plantation bell began to ring. Missy said it was time for everybody to stop work. She left her chair, ready to leave the room. Philip followed her to the door. He glanced at the canvas on the easel.

"I haven't even begun to sketch in your face, but we've made a beginning," he said, turning from the featureless blank to smile at her. "You don't know how much I value the few hours you give me—or how much knowing someone like you means to me—"

She murmured some deliberately commonplace answer, and escaped. Dozens of other young men had said, or implied, she was the center of their universe. Not the words, but Philip's eyes and voice had significance, and she was not sure how much she wanted him to mean.

Chapter Four

Just before Thanksgiving, Lucie and Frank Arden gave a supper party with dancing for Roy, Missy, and their friends. After nearly a week of rain, the weather cleared. When Philip handed Missy into the carriage, the others saw only conventional courtesy, but she felt the pressure of his fingers clinging to hers. Roy had gone hunting, and would have taken Philip with him, but Philip had developed a slight cold, with a touch of fever, and his uncle had prophesied an inflammation of the lungs would very likely set in if he ventured out in the swamp. Dr. Baring said he had treated several such cases, brought on by his patients'

imprudence. Roy and Philip both gave way to medical authority, and Philip stayed indoors.

His fever had subsided by evening, and his cough had soon left him. Missy knew it was sensible to take precautions, but she suspected he much preferred to be at Cibola than to be in the woods. During the last few days, their friendship had deepened. Most of the time, Roy had been away from the house; her mother was not an observant person, and perhaps Dr. Baring wasn't either, but Aunt Agnes kept a sharp eye on what was going on around her, and was quick to criticize. No one had warned Missy not to let herself drift too far. No one had seemed to notice how much time she and Philip had spent together, no one had seemed to see anything to question in his manner to her.

Used to flattery, she knew when it was not intended to be taken seriously. Her common sense told her girls were apt to imagine a deep significance in looks, sighs, and smiles. She tried to tell herself she was the victim of the same illusions. Philip had never said anything beyond the bounds of friendship, beyond the limits of lavish admiration, tinged with sentiment—not quite, but his eyes and voice expressed more than friendship, more than he dared to say yet.

Lucie Arden watched Missy come in with Philip, knowing other people were watching and commenting. She glanced at Frank, to see if he had become alert, but as he was welcoming groups of people coming in, his face told her nothing, and it was not the moment to ask him. He had seen very little of Missy since Philip had been at Cibola, as he had been busier than ever, and tomorrow he was leaving for Memphis, where he had been called into consultation on a case. After Christmas, he was going to the University of Maryland to give a series of lectures, and to receive an honorary degree. Lucie was going with him, to share in his glory. By that time, Philip would no longer be at Cibola, but he was staying through the holidays.

Detaching themselves from the group of young men, Missy and her former roommate Sara Dent went on to the room assigned to the ladies to take off their cloaks and carriage boots. At the moment, nobody else was in the room, and, as they had not seen each other since the day of the picnic at Bill Markham's plantation, they lingered to exchange bits of news and pass judgment on each other's appearance. The pale straw-colored silk, un-

trimmed except for a band of sable outlining the low-cut décolletage, was the perfect shade, Sara said, to bring out the lights in Missy's hair.

Sara unadorned, with her hair screwed tight in curl papers, was too thin and flat, all bones and eyes, reminding Missy of an unfledged bird, fallen too soon from its nest. Dressed to perfection, with a "wedding ring" waist, and nymphlike curves above—padding supplied what nature had failed to give—she was transformed into a delicate little figurine. Her complexion had a porcelain transparence, partly due to pearl powder, the tinge of color in her cheeks came from a "teeny-weeny suspicion" of rouge, and her lips matched the roses in her bouquet—coralline salve had been applied. Missy used it herself, to heighten the healthy red of her own mouth. Pale and deeper tinted moss roses were clustered in Sara's dark hair, and a few ringlets curled on her neck with beguiling ingenuousness.

"They look very natural," Missy assured her. "As if they had sprouted from your head of their own accord."

"Never tell a soul they didn't." She could trust Missy implicitly to keep her secrets.

Of course the real secret, as Missy knew, was the knack of creating an illusion of beauty without being beautiful. She began to tease Sara about Bill Markham. Sara was only exercising every girl's right to collect as many beaux as she possibly could, and from the assortment, pick the best available husband for herself. She had recently added Bill to her haul, and was seriously considering him. She lived on a plantation near Natchez, and Missy laughed at her for poaching on this side of the river.

"Nothing like Philip ever swam up to my door," Sara answered. "When my brother invited a cousin of ours to visit us, the critter turned out to be buck-toothed. At the Markhams', the girls went wild over Philip. It was pitiful the way they wilted when they saw they didn't have a ghost of a chance—"

"He danced with them, and talked to them. He made his manners, didn't he?" Missy protested. "He even did his Christian duty by the wallflowers, and trotted them out—"

"That's it. He was dutiful, and bunched all the rest of us with the wallflowers. You're the only person he wanted to be with—the only one he even saw."

At the dance and picnic, Sara Dent had seemed preoccupied

with her own concerns, and Missy had hoped to escape her scrutiny. Of course Sara had seen! She was coming back to Cibola after tonight's party, and would try to find out what she wanted to know—how Missy felt about Philip. Because the people living in the same house had seemed oblivious, Missy had been lulled into believing everybody else would be equally unobservant. At home, Philip's skill at snatching moments alone with her, the way he managed to tell her what was meant for her and for her alone, when his uncle and her family were present, had created a secret atmosphere between them. It was not secret any more, she realized, or only partly secret.

If Philip's interest in her was clearly understood by sharp-eyed contemporaries, they could only guess at her response to him. Missy congratulated herself on her own wariness. She had intended to be polite to Philip, kind, but distant. Her instincts and her pride had warned her against succumbing too easily. Though his looks dazzled her, and her sense of a bond linking them to each other drew her on, she was able to mask her own feelings. During these last few years, reserve had been growing on her, forming a smoothly glazed shell where she could hide.

She was not sure herself what her own emotions were—they were tangled and confused. On the surface, she was Miranda Severada, fitting a conventional pattern, but tonight a strange mood seized her. Let people whisper and speculate about Philip's interest in her, and hers in him, let them criticize, as some would, then she would be boldly and defiantly conspicuous. Some would disapprove of Philip, she knew, but she could ignore their opinion. Out of the tail of her eye, she saw her Uncle Frank hurrying out, his doctor's bag in his hand. He was going off on a sick call. Tomorrow, he was leaving for Memphis. He would not be here tonight, or for the next few weeks to watch over her! A pang of guilt struck her. Why did she look forward to the freedom his absence would give her?

In her heart, she knew the answer. She could never ignore what he thought and felt, even if he were not her legal guardian. She not only loved him too much, she respected his intelligence. Besides he worried over her and Roy. There was nothing to worry about, not now, not tonight! She gave herself up to the pleasure the evening offered. Where was she going? Where did she want to go? There was only one way to find out—to follow

wherever Philip's dark gaze was leading her, to test the strength of the silky meshes he was weaving around her. Then she would know if she could break away, or would be forever entangled.

In Philip's arms, she was no longer moving with her feet on the floor, she was floating, skimming over shining surfaces, flying, the way birds skimmed over the lake, their wings now and then touching the water, flicking into the quicksilver danger, then winging away.

Halcyon's wide hall and double parlors had been cleared. The dancers went spinning out of one door to reappear through another. Glancing up, Missy saw herself circling with Philip, their reflections encircled by the mirror's round gold frame. Someone else was in it too, someone not in the room. It was Arnold Baring, standing beyond the door. No one else seemed to be with him, and she couldn't see him, unless she looked at him in the mirror. Missy guessed he didn't know she could see him at all, and didn't intend for her to see him—the mirror had caught him by a trick, and held an image before her eyes.

His wide, ruddy face glowed with satisfaction, he was nodding his head in time to the beat of the music, and he was smiling, but the smile didn't brighten or enliven his eyes. His whole attention was concentrated on watching her, watching Philip as they danced together. She was the one he was staring at. His face in the glass showed her his gaze was fixed on her. His eyes were as lightless and hard as two stones, following her every move. He was too intent on his spying to realize what he was revealing to her. Lurking out of sight, he didn't know that the mirror had betrayed his chill, measuring gaze.

After the party, when all of the guests had gone, Lucie sat up to wait for Frank. Taking his body-servant Jem with him, Frank had set out on horseback to Halcyon Point, pushing through the dank black woods to reach a broadhorn tied up at the loop of the point. These trading boats—flatboats, scows, broadhorns—were moored along the bank, tucked away in sheltered places, then drifted downstream on the current. This particular broadhorn was waiting for the December rise to do a little petty bartering and selling, encumber the regular river traffic and be cursed by the pilots for getting in the way. Frank had been sent for on account of a sick child on the broadhorn, one of the swarming

family crowded in living quarters slapped together out of odds and ends of lumber and driftwood.

He had been called to Memphis on a stubborn case of fever. Through the years, Frank's reputation had grown until now other doctors wanted his advice, and patients up and down the river asked for him. He had contributed articles to medical journals, writing up some of his most interesting and baffling cases. Doctors from all over the South, all over the country corresponded with him. Late in the summer, the University of Maryland had invited him to give a series of lectures to students and faculty on his experience in treating various types of fever, offering him an honorary degree for his distinguished work.

When the letter had come, Lucie had been carried away with excitement. With visions of testimonial dinners and awards swimming in her head, she had begun to plan. The news had spread and a flurry of congratulations and good wishes had followed. Frank and Lucie were to leave in January, and be away from Halcyon for about two months. When she had first discussed their trip, Lucie had said how convenient it was to have Arnold Baring close at hand, to take over Frank's patients for him. Frank had hesitated, then had confessed. He had made arrangements for young Dr. Peters, who had just set up his practice in St. Clair, to take them on. In September, Dr. Taylor was coming to Coleville, a little settlement farther back in the swamp.

"He and young Peters have agreed to divide my cases between them. I know them both, and know something of their work—"

"But Frank—what about Arnold Baring?" Lucie had asked. "Why aren't you leaving your patients with him? I thought that was why he had set up his practice here—to help you out."

Cornered, Frank had admitted he was afraid Baring was getting lazy. "The other day an old squaw at the Indian camp came down with a bad attack. They sent word to Baring, but he never showed up there." Frank had gone himself.

"What sort of doctor is he, anyway?"

"He's had a pretty good education—a thorough grounding in medication and how to use drugs. All in all, he's above average—or ought to be. When he came, he made a good start. Everybody liked him—he coddled them. Now he seems to pick and choose. He's losing his starch. Maybe he'll pull himself together, but I

can't run the risk of leaving my patients in his hands. I don't know what's come over him—"

"It's Cibola," Lucie had answered. "It's a soft, easy life indoors—too great a contrast to hours of slogging through the swamp, in mud, dust, heat, cold, and swarms of mosquitoes."

She knew that Frank had explained the conditions here before Baring had decided to stay, but a description was not an experience. If he was afraid of hardships, Lucie had said, he should never have tried to be a country doctor, certainly not a doctor in this part of the South.

"Or a doctor at all," Frank had answered. "He's in the wrong boat."

Lucie had been afraid Arnold Baring would be affronted at being passed over for two younger men, but he seemed completely satisfied with the arrangements Frank had made not only for his stay in Maryland, but his shorter stay in Memphis. Dr. Taylor and Dr. Peters had promised to take care of Frank's patients for him whenever he was absent. Let the young ones get their hand in, Baring had said—he had as many patients himself as he could manage. Knowing something about the jealousy of medical men, Lucie thought he showed not so much a genial temper as a waning interest in his profession. Tonight, she had noticed he had not even made a tentative offer to go to the sick child in Frank's place, or to go with him.

Frank had told Missy he was willing to take steps, and ask Baring to find a house of his own before he himself went to Maryland. Missy had decided to wait until Roy agreed it was time for their stepfather to move out of Cibola. Both Frank and Lucie had thought it was much better to wait, and avoid any family rift. They had urged Missy to go with them to Maryland, but as Roy was talking seriously of going to Europe in the spring, she preferred to be at home this winter.

The responsibility of acting as guardian to Ernest Severada's children weighed heavily on Frank. He had prevented Roy from fighting any duels, had neatly extricated him from a flirtation with a young married woman with a jealous husband, had curbed his extravagance, and had opened his eyes to the worthlessness of a group of hangers-on. Roy had acquired a taste for a steadier group of friends, like young Markham, and seemed satisfied with his life of country gentleman, planter, and master of Cibola.

Next spring, at the end of March, he would be twenty-one, free of legal control, but Frank hoped to keep the influence he established over him. "That's why I don't pull too hard on the check rein unless I have to," he had explained to Lucie, and she had agreed, advising him to let Roy and Missy settle the question of when Baring should leave Cibola. He would soon settle everything himself, she had prophesied, by taking wing of his own accord. But Arnold Baring had lingered, and because he was at Cibola, Philip had come.

Sitting alone by the fire, Lucie remembered the look of relief on Frank's face when Missy had told him she had given up all idea of going to New Orleans after Christmas. His own absence for two months during this winter worried him. Every now and then he would grumble about going "way up yonder and staying so long," and hope Roy wouldn't get himself tangled in some wild venture. Lucie managed to soothe her husband's forebodings by pointing out that Roy would soon be his own master, anyway. As for Missy, she had never given a minute's trouble.

"Remember, Frank, it's not as if she was in a city, so you don't have to worry about her whirling around at masked balls—"

"Where some fortune hunter might sneak in and manage to meet her." Frank had smiled. "If she stays at home or near home, we'll have some inkling of what's going on and who she's with."

Frank had agreed not to fret about Missy while he was in Maryland, but that had been two or more months ago, before he had seen Philip. Though Frank had not told her he was uneasy, Lucie felt sure he must be. He was always on the alert to keep Missy from meeting some unsuitable man. Now the danger was right under her own roof.

Some slight sound outside made Lucie leave her chair and go to the window, hoping she heard Frank coming home, but when she pushed back the curtains she saw only the black trees clumped against the starless sky. None of the dogs were barking, and she roamed back to the fire, pushing Frank's carpet slippers closer to the fire to get thoroughly warm, looking to see if everything was on the table so she could make him a hot toddy. There! Frank's old hound was giving tongue with the special baying, the note of recognition reserved for Frank. He and Jem must be turning in the gate. Lucie went to the window to watch

for the first glint of lantern light. When she saw it, she hurried to the door, taking the well-warmed slippers with her—not wafted to him out of wifely solicitude, Frank always claimed, but out of housewifely fears of mud tracked into the house.

After he had pulled off his boots and his damp clothes, Frank came back to the sitting room in his dressing gown and slippers, to sit down by the fire with Lucie and drink the toddy she had mixed for him. She asked about the child. Frank said the poor little wretch would be all right if the mother would follow the directions he had given, and keep on with the prescription he had left.

"The current's already strong enough to carry them downstream, so they'll get under way tomorrow."

Besides mother, father, grandmother, children, the usual wares, the usual goat, there was a pig on the broadhorn. Grateful to Frank, the parents had offered him the pig, even the goat. He had taken a pumpkin. "So they'll feel they've paid me." He hoped they would just take care of the child.

"This is cozy, but you shouldn't have waited up for me, Lucie. The party seemed to be going with a swing."

"It held up well—" She hesitated, not wanting to bring up a problem when it was late and Frank was tired, but he was going to Memphis, to be gone for several weeks, and would not be able to see for himself. "But there may be a situation brewing—"

"What's Roy up to now?"

"It's not Roy—"

"It's Missy and that young man!" Frank sat bolt upright. "As soon as I laid eyes on him, I smelled thunder."

"I thought you would," Lucie said. Though Frank had not seen much of Philip, he had at once recognized possibilities, as Lucie had. The sight of Philip was enough.

"People are gossiping about the attention he's paying her," Lucie said.

"No wonder. Tonight I saw a sample of it myself. What do you think, Lucie? Is it serious?"

"He seems very much in love. If he is, I'm sorry for him."

"So am I, but he has no business to be— You know that as well as I do! He has no right to be more than pleasant to any girl until he can support himself, and a wife, and a family. At present he hasn't got a picayune." Frank had married a girl without a

penny. He approved of young men marrying poor girls, but not of poor young men marrying rich ones—or poor ones either.

"I haven't seen them together often. Before I couldn't tell about her. You know how reserved she is in public. She was tonight—" Lucie tried to evaluate what she had sensed. Missy had the reserve, the composure of a cat. "Certainly nobody could find anything to criticize in her behavior, but she seemed restless —and waked up."

Frank frowned. "That's bad. Then he's new on the scene, and not like the young men she's used to—"

"Even if there wasn't so much cause for people to wonder what is going to come next, everybody would look at them. They set each other off. He and Missy are perfectly matched as dancing partners." Lucie thought of them whirling through the rooms, all smoothness and grace, Philip's dark dramatic good looks contrasting with and emphasizing Missy's subtle coloring. They had been shadow and sunlight, night and day.

"While Roy was on a hunt, Philip and Missy were shut up in the same house," Lucie pointed out. "And they go to parties together. Propinquity and waltz music breed romance."

Frank sighed. "Roy asked for trouble when he invited Philip."

"He flings out his generous impulses like largesse and sweeps on, creating a turmoil in his wake." Lucie smiled. "I don't believe he has noticed what's going on."

"I'll open his eyes," Frank said. "He wouldn't consider Philip as a match for Missy."

"Neither would Juliette, but you know how she can ignore whatever she doesn't want to see."

Lucie wondered what Agnes saw, and what she thought. She liked Philip, but she had the Snowes' highfalutin ideas. Not that her opinion weighed with Missy. Naturally Arnold Baring would be delighted if his nephew could marry Missy, and that was one more reason why Lucie was against it. Since she had found out that Baring was staying, but had grown slack and unreliable as a doctor, she suspected he was looking for some way to establish a foothold at Cibola.

"I'm putting my foot down," Frank said. "I'll haul Roy over here in the morning and have a talk with him. He'll have to smoke Philip out, and give him the choice of halting his attentions to

Missy, or clearing out. I think it would be better for Roy to tell Philip than for me to broach the subject to him."

"It would be less awkward, coming from Roy," Lucie said, "but decrees can't halt feelings."

"Not if Philip's in love. It's hard on him, poor fella, but if he has any backbone he'll know it's the right thing. Missy's the one I'm worried about—"

"She's interested, but I don't think she's plunged," said Lucie. "What are you going to say to her?"

"I'll let Roy say it. It would be more palatable coming from him, but I want him to put it before her very plainly. I want her to promise not to give Philip a particle of encouragement. She has gumption—she can see it's wrong for a young man to pay court to her when he can't afford to marry. If she gives her word, she'll keep it."

"If she gives it—Philip's very attractive. His good looks and charm might overbalance her common sense. Suppose she refuses point-blank to make any promises—then what?"

"Philip will have to cut short his visit, and leave Cibola at once. It sounds, well, drastic, but that's what he ought to do. Fling our conditions in Roy's teeth, my teeth, and go careening off, declaring he'll conquer the world for Missy's sake."

Frank pictured Philip hurling himself away, after a violently emotional scene. Then he might become a heroic, romantic figure to Missy, unfairly treated. She might see herself and Philip as the traditional pair of lovers, wrenched away from each other by the harshness of guardian and brother, true love pitted against the worldliness of a material-minded code.

"I don't want the child to make any promises about waiting for him, either," Frank meditated aloud, with visions of Missy tying herself up with a long engagement.

"She won't," Lucie said. "She has too much sense. Besides, I doubt if Philip will leave a moment before he has to, no matter what she or he promise."

"Then I better get him off now."

"I wouldn't," Lucie advised. "It would make them rebellious and defiant maybe. They've met, so everything depends on them. Give them a reasonable choice. He'll be gone soon anyway, and I hope she'll forget him. If he stays, when they've both promised to leave each other alone, it'll give her a chanec to find out some-

thing about him—" If a young man in love lingered, promising to leave all courtship, would he intend to give her up, or would he be playing for time and change, or would he be following some deep-laid strategy either for love or for some more material reason?

Frank was thinking of a talk with Missy's father, the day before Ernest Severada's death, when Ernest had said: "I know you'll do the best you can. Roy's rash, but he gets over things. Missy takes things to heart. If she married the wrong man—if she learned to despise him—God knows what would happen."

The words came back to Frank now and he found himself saying, more to Missy's dead father than to Lucie, "I'll do anything and everything to keep the child from making a mistake. She mustn't throw herself away!"

Even as he spoke, Frank knew how limited his own power over Missy was. Like Roy, she soon would be free of a guardian, and he could only trust his influence and her good judgment. Removing Philip woud not keep her from marrying him if she chose. He might be the right person for her, he might be wrong for her, but she was going to be the one to decide and choose.

Lucie somewhat eased his forebodings by saying, "Don't worry. If Philip stays until after Christmas, Missy will get tired of him."

Frank asked what made her think so. She only answered, "You'll see—because, I think that Missy wants the kind of man who would dash off and win for her sake."

Chapter Five

After the party, on the way back to Cibola, Roy, Philip, and Sara sang. Missy, who couldn't carry a tune, listened, watching the last quarter of a hunter's moon come up to shine on the stillness of the lake and fling gauzy webs across the road. When they were in the house, the four young people were too keyed

up to want sleep. Missy asked Philip to play the piano for them.

"Anything to prolong tonight," he answered, lowering his voice, speaking to her and for her. "I don't want it to end—ever."

There was a piano in the back parlor, but the best one was in the ballroom. Roy lighted the fire and Philip lighted the candles. "We ought to dance pavans and minuets here!" he said.

Girandoles, hung with crystals, flickered with golden reflections; the walls were paneled in white, the wood narrowly outlined in gold. Between the panels were insets of citron-yellow brocaded silk.

"We're going to have a ball here on Twelfth-night," Roy said.

"I'll be gone by then," Philip sighed. "I hope you'll spare me a thought. I'll be thinking of all of you."

Roy frowned. "It's a shame you won't be here, Philip. Can't you put off going until after the sixth of January?"

"I only wish I could think of some way—" He watched Missy, his face shadowed with his gloom. She was afraid to speak, afraid of showing to him and the others what pangs she was feeling.

"Maybe we can fix up something," Roy said.

How? When Philip had to be at school by a certain date, ready to teach—when he had to earn his living. Missy saw no hope. Roy always thought he could work some conjure, triumphantly turning wishes into horses. When Philip sat down at the piano, Missy began to turn her own wishes into horses, Pegasus in flight. Against the pale clarity of white, lemon yellow and cool gilt, Philip was a dark silhouette, except where the candlelight fell on his dark face and his long, sensitive hands.

With the last chord, she came to herself with a start. Philip was looking at her, measuring the quality of her response. He had always praised her taste, her appreciation for music. She would never dare confess that after the first few bars, she hadn't heard a note, and had forgotten him. Mentally, she had been rambling through a sunny, weedy field behind the pasture where Cibola's prize bull, red and ill-tempered, grazed with his harem of cows.

Good nights were said. Sara started up the steps ahead of Missy, who was about to follow when Philip seized her hand,

and kissed it with lingering fervor. She broke away, and went flying. Roy had been putting out the lamp near the front door, and hadn't noticed, but Sara, glancing back, had seen. Her big eyes grew bigger still. She waited until Missy drew up a footstool close to the fire in her upstairs sitting room, and began to plait her long hair. Sara busied herself unpinning her false ringlets, rubbing rose water and glycerin over her face, and set to work twisting her own hair into curl papers.

"Poor Philip," she sighed. "It's pitiful the way he longs to be here for Twelfth-night. Are you going to let him go?"

"There's nothing I can do about it."

"Yes, there is—if you want to . . . enough," Sara ventured. "He's in love, so you're the one who has to decide."

Young men had been in love with Missy before, and she had never cared for them. What she wanted now was to stay in the warm romantic haze where she and Philip dwelt apart. Tonight, observing eyes had ripped away the glowing cloud, showing her that she and Philip were living in the real world. Philip too was pushing her toward decisions. Everybody who met him seemed to think he was particularly gifted. "A promising young man," they said, but he had yet to take the first step in making his way. Assuming he was in love, he would not tell her good-by without confessing he loved her, unless she prevented him from it.

"I suppose he is star-crossed," Sara sighed. "Your Uncle Frank and your mother and Roy won't approve at all. My parents wouldn't either."

"Then as I'm still a minor, under Uncle Frank's wing, what do you expect me to do? Wait and hope and pine while he forgets all about me? I'm not a willow-wearer."

"I suppose you could elope," Sara suggested. "Your Uncle Frank and your family would forgive you."

They would, Missy knew, and some day she would be twenty-one, with so much money of her own Philip would never have to earn any, but what would Philip do with himself? Stay here and do nothing? She would never let him take over her share of Cibola, or Tanglewild. He could only be a prince consort, and they had only limited uses. After nuptial flights, industrious insects like spiders and bees sensibly got rid of them.

"Remember I know what a humbug you are, Sara. You

wouldn't give up a big church wedding and a long lace veil and a dozen bridesmaids to elope with any man on earth!"

"I wouldn't," Sara admitted, "but you don't care about things like that—you're different."

Above the mantelpiece, in an oval frame, was the portrait of Missy's grandmother. Her russet-brown hair was caught up and tied back under a Grecian fillet of narrow ribbons, a gauzy scarf hardly veiled her smooth bare shoulders, the clinging folds of her dress, girdled below her breasts, indicated the graceful curves of her bosom. Like Missy's neck and shoulders and breasts, Sara thought, enough and not too much. Missy could have worn wispy muslins and revealing draperies. In figure and face too, though the other Ana Miranda had darker coloring, Sara could see the resemblance between her and her namesake, the same warm skin tones, thick eyelids, and short thick upper lip. Missy might have the same sort of temperament—all for love and the world well lost.

"I wouldn't worry too much about Philip's feelings," Sara said. "It's what you want, or don't want, but I guess you'll soon have to make up your mind."

Missy was not given to making disclosures, but Sara Dent was her best friend and had her interest at heart. Besides, beneath her air of romantic artlessness, she was intelligent in her appraisals of people and situations.

"The trouble is, I'm not sure what I want," Missy said. "He's not like any man I've ever met before."

"He's the most handsome creature I've ever seen, or ever will see," Sara said. "He reminds me of that picture I cut out and fell in love with when we were at school—Count d'Orsay. Only Philip's taller. But they're the same type, with charm besides good looks, and a talent for painting and music—"

Missy remembered the picture of Count d'Orsay. There was a vague, superficial resemblance. Sara's innocent remark made Missy think of the Count's history—he had married a rich girl so that he and her stepmother could carry on their love affair in grand style. Could dim analogies be stirring in Sara's mind? Of course not! That was absurd, yet she had referred to a case where a young girl with a large amount of money had been the victim of a conspiracy.

"Though I don't think Philip falls into any type," Sara amended. "It's the first time I've ever known you not to be sure what you want and don't want, and that's why it's hard for you to make up your mind—because he isn't a type."

"I don't suppose anybody is really," Missy said.

"Maybe not, but other people are easier to place. There's something—mysterious about Philip."

Missy smiled. "You mean—if I give him up, I won't run across a duplicate Philip. No, I don't guess I ever will." She got up and snuffed out the candles.

Long after Sara was asleep, Missy stayed awake, thinking. The time had come when she must decide. Like the other Ana Miranda, she felt she could defy all the world, fling everything away—everything except Cibola and Tanglewild—if she loved someone enough. Her feelings for Philip didn't have that strength or depth—not yet. The lingering, clinging touch of his lips on her hand had not entirely enthralled her—not as much at the moment as in retrospect, contrary to other such experiences, when she had enjoyed the kiss, then had forgotten it.

Maybe Philip did want to marry her, but even if there had been no complications, even if everyone she loved, everyone she knew urged it, she was not sure she wanted to marry him, or anyone. Why must she decide to smother all emotions, or be ready to swear she would tie herself to him and no other all her life long? Give him up? Was that the only alternative? She rebelled against snapping the secret thread binding them together. Philip's face flashed before her eyes, as she had seen it the first time, illumined in the lantern's glow—that unexpected face, surprising her with the sudden impact of its beauty, startling her like an image evoked out of darkness by magic. The mysterious stranger!

Through the open door, Missy could see the ebbing firelight flicker on her grandmother's portrait—Missy never thought of her except as the other Ana Miranda. What an unusual reversal, for a grandmother to seem scandalous to a granddaughter! Instead of a Bible, she held a flower in her hand. Her enigmatic, half-smiling glance reminded the living Ana Miranda of the love beyond the bounds of marriage. Manners might be more sedate now, but plenty of women had lovers, not only the women who

lived behind the closed shutters of the houses on Silver Street in Natchez Under the Hill. Every now and then gossip flared up about this one or that one in some fine mansion on top of the bluff, to die down, or explode in scandal.

Besides the women who were unlucky enough to be talked about, there must be others, clever women, or lucky women. Nobody whispered about them because nobody suspected them. They knew how to keep their secrets. It would be easy to hide a love affair in a plantation house, Missy thought, particularly easy in this room, this bed, where another Ana Miranda had slept in Alex Severada's arms before he was her husband. Somebody could come silently up the back steps and knock very softly on the door. Nobody would ever guess, except the servants. They always knew everything, but never talked, except to one another. They took love sometimes lightheartedly, sometimes with violence, but they accepted it as natural, whether it was lawful or lawless. Maybe that was the way everybody was meant to take it.

Someone could open the door without a sound, and come in, whispering her name, come to the bed and lean over her. She would not be able to see him clearly there in the warm shadows of the bed curtains, but she would sit up and put her arms around him, drawing him close to kiss his mouth. A flutter of flame from the hearth, or a sly moonbeam slipping through a chink in the shutters, would show her his face, his dark eyes.

Suddenly, Missy remembered how the thin horned crescent of the moon had slanted its light on Philip, paling his face, turning it wan, glittering in his eyes, giving them a cold, unearthly brightness. She recoiled from the image of Philip coming to her room, to her bed, of herself drawing his mouth to hers—it was an abrupt fading, like waking up from the restless, hotly colored pictures painted by a fever dream.

Why? Why did that memory affect her, when at the time she had seen it was only a trick of the moon? At last she thought of a story she had once read, a gloomy tale that had frightened her in her childhood. She had forgotten nearly all of it but the ending, a description of someone putting coins on the eyes of a dead man, a murdered man, and the coins glinting in the dark.

Then she fell asleep.

When Missy went downstairs to breakfast, leaving Sara still asleep, she heard voices in the dining room. Unseen in the shadowy hall, she looked through the open door. A snapping fire and the sun coming in the windows showed up the vivid colors in the room, adding sheen to silver and sparkle to crystal. Only her stepfather and her aunt were at the table. Agnes was officiating as the mistress of the house, pouring Dr. Baring's coffee for him.

Turning away, Missy ate her own breakfast in the pantry without much appetite, and plunged outdoors, where she never felt alien. There were times—this morning was one of them—when she felt she had no place in her own house. The picture of those two at the table lingered in her mind. They exuded an entrenched . . . smugness. She accepted her aunt as a duty and responsibility, a permanent fixture at Cibola, but Arnold Baring was a pig wallowing in lush clover. She had to smother her rebelliousness, keep it to herself. All the rest of the world seemed to like her stepfather, seemed to accept him here. One other person shared her feelings. One other person would understand.

Before she reached the garden path winding to the side gate, Missy heard Philip calling her, "Wait—please wait!" Reluctantly she stopped, sorry he had caught her in a bad mood. He overtook her. "How did you get out and up so fast?" he demanded, "or rather up and out—I saw you, so I followed you—I have something important to tell you!"

"Something good, from the looks of you." She had never seen him so exuberant, or so handsome.

"Such a stroke of luck I'm still reeling," he laughed. "Last night, Roy asked me if I would stay on here, as his tutor! Later on, in the spring, he wants me to travel with him, to Europe. What do you think of that?"

"It makes me reel too," Missy faltered. "I can't take it in yet."

Perhaps surprise accounted for the drag of her listlessness.

"But—but what are you going to do about your school?"

"Right after I'd talked with Roy, I sat down and wrote to the headmaster—explaining why I couldn't be there in January, or ever, thank God!"

"Hadn't you better think it over?" She realized she was betraying her blank sense of anticlimax. Instead of sharing his excite-

ment, she had turned into a wet blanket, but he was too carried away by his own elation to notice her reaction.

"It's all decided. My letter went off on the early boat. Now I've burned all my bridges!"

She saw him standing there in the early morning sun, laughing, his dark eyes bright with triumph, his buoyant mood adding extra luster to his good looks, and yet—she knew it now—she didn't want him here month in and month out.

"Don't you see what it means to me, Miranda?" Philip caught her hands. "Don't you see? I won't have to say good-by to you!"

She freed her hands, thankful to hear Roy's voice shouting for him, and, making some excuse about an errand, escaped.

Hurrying along the path to the side gate, she tried to collect her wits. Philip had thrown away his position, burned his bridges to stay, and whatever feelings she had ever had for him had flickered out like so much swamp fire! She had not committed herself, but she could see how her halfhearted evasions could be read as encouragement. Philip had a right to feel that she had encouraged him. He was pinning his hopes on her! Now she had to map out a strategy of retreat—extricate herself as gracefully as she could. Why had such a fool notion darted into Roy's head? The date of Philip's departure had been fixed. Shut up in the house with him through the winter, Missy foresaw tiresome maneuverings ahead. What a fool she had been!

As she flew along the path, the shrubbery swayed and whispered. Before she knew it, she reached the gate. Across the road was Aunt Dora's cabin.

Chapter Six

Frank Arden always said that Aunt Dora was the best natural-born nurse he had ever met, both for taking care of the sick and for bringing up children. If any man or woman in the South could claim good manners or "right raisin'" he or she

owed it to the influence of mammies like Aunt Dora. When he had cases of illness on the plantation, he asked for her to help care for the patient, and he approved of the tonic she made every spring from the herbs she grew in her own yard, supplemented by those she gathered in the woods and fields. After all her herbs had dried in the sun, she brewed and then strained them. Their steepings resulted in a sharp-tasting tisane. Frank thought it was as good, or better, than most of the usual concoctions, and her doses were administered to Roy and Missy along with all of the other children on the place.

Aunt Dora knew which wild plants and berries were poisonous, which were harmless. She could find the mushrooms that were good to eat, and instantly detected what the distinctive markings showed, pointing out the "devil stools"—warning the children one bite would kill. Frank teased Missy about putting more faith in Aunt Dora's medications than in his. "She has a big advantage over me—I can't claim my grandpa was a genuine witch doctor."

He had not even met any, but in answering Missy's questions about witch doctors, he had grown serious. From what he had heard or read, some of them must be men with a natural flair for medicine. Not all of their power came from playing on superstition. The wisest ones, he felt, had learned more about the effect of mind and emotions over physical ills than doctors in Western countries had yet found out. His life on a plantation in the swamp forced him to think about it, he said, because he had been called on to treat baffling cases when a man or a woman had thought he or she was "voodooed," and had died from no known cause.

Even after she was too old to need a nurse, Missy had always spent a large part of her time with Aunt Dora, listening with half an ear to reiterated instructions on manners and behavior, listening with both ears to the stories Aunt Dora could tell when "she had a mind to," and begging for more. Missy's imagination took wing with ease; anything mysterious or fantastic attracted her. Sometimes, going back to the house after dusk, she had gone running through the garden, glancing over her shoulder to see if Indians, wild animals, or ghosts were chasing her, almost hoping they were, and thoroughly enjoying her own terrors, trying to pretend she was afraid long after she knew the marvelous tales were all make believe.

She realized now that the terrifying stories Aunt Dora could have told were the true ones, out of memory and experience, but she had never wanted to talk about the times when the epidemics of cholera and yellow fever had struck, or about the *Pannonia*. Years ago, sudden thunder on a starlit night had roused everybody on the plantation, everybody living anywhere near. The big packet *Pannonia* had exploded off Tanglewild Reach, not far from the landing. Pilothouse and chimneys had come crashing down on the lower decks. In scant seconds, clouds of steam, uncontrollable fire had billowed up.

Old Job, a strong young man then, and the other hands had set out in skiffs to pick up the people floating in the water. Aunt Dora had helped to nurse the few survivors, and to lay out the dead. The casualty list had been enormous—362 people had been lost, 362 men, women and children scalded by steam, charred by fire, mangled by the machinery. When a steamboat exploded no one on board had much chance of survival, and not many met the relatively peaceful death of drowning in the river. Most of the bodies had never been found. Missy had learned not to ask about the *Pannonia*.

She contented herself with Aunt Dora's inexhaustible reminiscences, anecdotes, and stories about all the people she had ever known or heard of, some of her accounts were funny, some tragic, some strange, some scandalous. Her sharp eye for the quirks of human nature, her graphic descriptions, her dramatic knack of mimicking voices, gestures, and mannerisms beguiled Missy into believing she herself had seen, heard, known, and talked to men and women dead long before she had ever been born.

Aunt Dora had her well-built, well-furnished cabin all to herself, and relished living alone, "fine as a queen." Her children and grandchildren were always trailing back and forth, and were still under her thumb. The hands brought her all the news of Cibola, Tanglewild, and Halcyon, and all of their disputes, woes, and problems. So did Missy. Just beyond the garden's side gate was a road, rambling off to join the other little roads curling through Cibola. Right across the road was the cabin, set off to itself.

Whitewashed pickets fenced in a little yard, swept bare of any

blade of grass. Flowers flourished in neat brick-bordered beds, blazing bright with color through spring and summer; chrysanthemums were blooming now, fluffs of gold and bronze and dark red, the rose bushes were still covered with blossoms and buds. Pots of ferns, begonias, and geraniums lined the porch railing. Thin blue smoke came out of the brick chimney. In the morning sun, gleaming with a fresh coat of whitewash, the cabin was a chalked-out square defined against the great mass of the live oak behind it.

In winter, the tree sheltered the cabin from the north wind; in summer, the heavy foliage and down-sweeping branches made a benign pool of shade. Missy, Roy, their father in his boyhood, Aunt Dora's children and grandchildren had all climbed the oak, played in it, built forts and houses in it. Missy had a favorite branch where she loved to sit and read, hidden from sight, as much at home as birds and squirrels. This fall a big owl had taken to sleeping there in the daytime. Before she came in Aunt Dora's gate, Missy heard the birds scolding the owl. At the foot of the cabin's back steps was a cistern under a grape arbor. The water from it always tasted better to Missy on a hot day than the ice water she drank at the house. The persimmons on the tree a little beyond the fence had a finer flavor than any fruit served at the table. Missy loved persimmons like a possum, and saw them swinging through the faded leaves now, like tiny rosy-orange lanterns.

Since it was a mild day, the front door was ajar. An enormous black tomcat was asleep on the steps, opening one golden eye when Missy stooped to scratch behind his ears. He was not well-behaved, she told him, she had heard him fighting under her windows in the night, battling until sunup. At the sound of her voice, Aunt Dora came out, asking her why she had been awake like a cat.

"I just wasn't sleepy," Missy evaded, knowing Aunt Dora would ask her what she had on her mind.

At the moment, she only invited Missy to come in and eat the hoecakes she was turning on the stove. Sitting at the kitchen table, Missy ate a stack of hoecakes dripping with butter and molasses, and drank two cups of coffee. The cat had followed her in, purring. The day was warm enough to leave the wooden

shutters open. Out in the back yard, she could see a star pattern quilt and a sunburst pattern quilt sunning on the line. Aunt Dora's wash was strung out too, full-skirted calico dresses, sturdy flannel petticoats, checked aprons and white aprons—blazing white and rigid with starch.

After she had finished the hoecakes, Missy felt better, though a cold and empty aching still persisted, not of course in the pit of her stomach, where it seemed to be, but in her mind.

"I didn't want any breakfast at the house—" She described her aunt and her stepfather breakfasting together. Aunt Dora whisked away the plate and cup, and sat down at the other end of the table. She advised Missy to play possum for a while, and not to let her stepfather come between her and her brother.

"No, I won't— Mr. Philip's staying on for a while."

Aunt Dora had already "heard tell of it." Though she didn't reveal the source of her information, Missy could easily guess. Philip must have told his uncle, Dr. Baring and Aunt Agnes had discussed it at breakfast, one of the houseboys waiting on the table had heard and had spread the news, then someone among the servants had promptly brought it to Aunt Dora's cabin.

Aunt Dora looked up from her darning. "You glad?"

"I would have been yesterday, but today I'm not."

"How come you changed so fast?" She pushed the darning egg in the toe of a long woolen stocking and began to fill in the hole with a basket-weaving of threads.

"I don't know why. I stayed awake almost till sunup thinking about him—" She didn't confess she had imagined him stealing to her room, to her bed, taking her in his arms. "Then I remembered seeing him once in the moonlight, with shadows around his eyes, and his eyes turned to silver, and somehow I thought of a story you read to me when I was sick in bed, about a murdered man lying dead in the dark with silver coins on his eyes. Do you remember it?"

Aunt Dora nodded. "It scairt you."

"I don't know why, but it terrified me—you were sorry you had read it. But it doesn't scare me now, so I don't understand why suddenly I couldn't even imagine kissing Mr. Philip—and I can't today either."

This morning, when he had waylaid her in the garden, he had looked like himself, at his best, and who could equal Philip

at his best? But the sight of him had not rekindled her fantasy, even before he had told her his news. How could she have dreamed of him as a secret lover? Through no fault of his, she had found out she did not want him as a lover at all. What she wanted was for him to stop being in love with her, as quickly and painlessly as possible, and free her from his pursuit, so she would escape the trouble of freeing herself.

Aunt Dora was watching her. "You had a sign, chile."

"Of what?" Missy asked.

"Your mind tolt you it was quittin' time."

The interpretation showed Missy some of the workings of Aunt Dora's mind, if not her own. She knew that Aunt Dora would share the general opinion branding Philip as unsuitable, but she probably had some deeper, more obscure reason for eying him with disfavor. Maybe she didn't know what it was herself, and if she did, she was not likely to reveal it even if asked.

"Maybe he'll get a sign too," Missy said. Perhaps he would find out that his feelings for her were as illusory as hers for him. How well did he know her? She saw now what she had done—she had tried to seem just what she had thought he would admire, and had never given him any clue to her real character. He was always saying that he and she had the same tastes, shared the same feelings. But he had never showed any interest in the plantation and the countryside. He didn't understand that the earth, the dark cotton-growing earth, was the heart and essence of Cibola, and that Cibola existed because the river had created it.

There was no secret tie of communication between herself and Philip. His flattery, his charm had deluded her into thinking so. He had not deceived her—it was mortifying to admit it—but her own imagination had fooled her.

Her darn finished, Aunt Dora snipped the thread, stuck the needle in the bosom of her apron along with the other needles and pins already there, and rolled the stocking with its mate. She said she reckoned Mr. Philip and Dr. Baring were cut from the same bolt of cloth.

"What gave you that notion, Aunt Do?" Missy protested. "You couldn't find two people more unlike each other in every way!"

They didn't look like each other, Aunt Dora answered, or

seem like each other, but both of them were staying on at Cibola, first Dr. Baring, now Mr. Philip. "He aims to set a spell, pattin' his foot."

None of the men came back to the house for dinner. At the table Agnes pointed out the benefits of Roy's plan. Philip would be able to tour Europe, and Roy would have an ideal traveling companion—a friend of his own age who had the artistic tastes and education to be an excellent guide. After the holidays, Roy and Philip could read and study in preparation for their tour.

Juliette said she was glad to have Philip's company through the winter, but she doubted if Roy would settle down long enough to study, or even read anything serious. "He always hated school, and schoolbooks."

Her mother's mild comment coincided with Aunt Dora's opinion, and Missy's own certainty that "tutor" was merely a word Roy had invented on the spur of the moment; as Roy was fired by the notion of having Philip go to Europe with him, and as Philip could not afford to give up his position Roy must have offered to pay him a salary, then hit upon a pretext to quench any doubts Philip might have had, and salve his dignity. Philip could teach him. Of course it was sheer nonsense. Philip might just as well call himself tutor to a dragonfly. Aunt Dora was right—through the winter at least, Philip would "set and pat his foot." In the twinkling of an eye, Roy had "worked a conjure."

Sara Dent left Cibola immediately after dinner. On the way to the landing, alone in the carriage together, she and Missy discussed plans for the holiday parties, when Sara was coming back to Cibola for a longer visit.

"Philip's wish is coming true," she said. "Now he'll dance at your Twelfth-night ball." Maybe he was born lucky, she added, maybe all of his wishes would come true.

She was implying what Philip had implied—almost said—that he had seized on Roy's offer because he was in love. Philip was gambling, Missy felt, on her response, now, when she had no response to offer. She felt a twinge of guilt, but decided there was nothing she could do about her own feelings—it was not her fault if she had changed. Philip had acumen enough to see the difficulties ahead if he counted on marrying her. Perhaps he

was gambling on his power over her, not knowing the odds were all against him. But gamblers knew they were taking risks, and he had something gained—he would enjoy traveling, she thought, and would soon forget all about her. If he had given up his position, he could find another.

The steamboat came into sight. After she had stepped on the gangplank, Sara turned to say, "You be careful, Missy."

When she reached the house again, Missy put on boots and outdoor clothes, and rambled over the plantation until the bell rang for sundown. At teatime, she sent word she was tired, and would not come down. She had her tea alone, in her upstairs sitting room. Unless an overflow of guests were staying in the house, Missy had the south wing to herself. The wings were only one-room deep, with columned galleries on each side, matching the lower galleries. A flight of steps, built for the servants to come and go, led from the gallery to the ground floor. Missy found the steps convenient for comings and goings of her own.

The old nursery, long deserted, opened directly into the upstairs hall. The nursery and the room once occupied by the governess had been converted into guest rooms. The schoolroom was unchanged since Missy and Roy had learned their lessons there, though at times when there was a great overflow of people spending the night, trundle beds were put up. Behind the schoolroom, Missy had her own quarters, bedroom, sitting room, and dressing room. She cherished her remoteness from the main part of the house.

In cold weather, or cool weather, she kept her windows closed at night, with heavy folds of pale honey-colored brocade drawn over them. She had a true Creole's horror of much fresh air indoors. After the first chill of fall, the mosquito bar was taken away and hangings were put up around the bed, the same pale gold as the curtains, to be drawn all around the big four-poster as a protection against drafts. In the morning, when the plantation bell began to ring, Rosie brought the coffee, and built up the fire. Even if it was raining outside, Missy always woke up to find her sunny nook suffused with warm brightness. At night, shut in, sunk in a mountain of a feather bed, she loved to fall asleep watching the fire flicker and ebb to a glow.

The original house at Cibola had been sparsely furnished with a few plain, sturdy pieces, mostly made on the plantation, until

the other Ana Miranda had brought her possessions here. It had always been easier for Natchez people to import their silver, china, and furniture from Europe than to get their household goods from the North, when everything had to be hauled on flatboats, or through trackless forests. The day bed, the graceful dressing table with its swan-necked mirror, and the delicate little inlaid desk Missy used had been her grandmother's.

Sitting at the desk, Missy was trying to sort out invitations for holiday parties, and decide which ones to accept and which ones to refuse, but her mind was not on the task of note writing. Footsteps, Roy's footsteps sounded along the gallery, and his voice outside the door called her, asking her if she was still up and awake. She invited him in, and told him to give the fire a poke before he sat down. He jabbed at a lump of coal, took a chair and looked around. "You're as snug in here as a bear in a hollow tree."

Missy had gathered her favorite books and possessions in her own rooms. Downstairs, there was not much scope for the vagaries of anyone's individual tastes. Everything was complete, to the last detail, the last coffee spoon. If anything was broken or lost, it was replaced with a replica of the original if possible. When upholstery and hangings began to look worn or faded, the looms at Lyons, where the designs were kept, supplied more, in the exact shade, pattern, and quality.

Roy commented favorably on the peach-colored velvet peignoir Missy was wearing. He had decided and fastidious tastes about style and elegance. "What a raggedy Ann you were—you used to leave a regular trail of torn pantalette frills and sashes behind you like the scraps of a paper chase."

"I still am raggedy Ann at heart. Rosie threw away my comfortable old flannel wrapper."

"I agree with Philip—a woman ought to look as well when she doesn't expect to be seen as when she does. Of course you know he's staying on—"

"He told me this morning."

"It seemed a good thing when the idea struck me, so I settled it with Philip. Maybe I was a little too quick on the trigger."

"It's too late to wonder whether you were or not. You can't back out now, he's counting on you." Missy was careful not to

be critical. Decisions had been made, and it was no use for either Philip or Roy to see the plan with her eyes.

"Back out? Of course I can't!" Roy said, "But today when I went to see Uncle Frank—"

"Didn't he get off to Memphis?"

"On the *Eclipse*, but that was later on. He sent word he wanted to see me before he left, so I went over there this morning early. He had you on his mind, you and Philip."

"What did he have to say?" Missy could already guess what her Uncle Frank's attitude would be.

"It seems people were buzzing last night at the amount of attention Philip's been paying you. Once he opened my eyes, I could see for myself. I don't know why I didn't prick up my ears sooner. I took it for granted Philip had too much sense to get ideas about you, or to try to put them in your head. Then I had to own up to Uncle Frank what I'd done—tell him Philip'll be here—right on hand—all winter. That put a burr under his saddle!"

Picturing Uncle Frank's expression as clearly as if she had seen his face herself, Missy began to laugh.

"You do pull the most—unexpected rabbits out of your hat!"

Roy laughed too, then grew sober again. "Look here, Missy, you had better take this seriously, because Uncle Frank does, and I do!"

In many ways, Roy was conventional. His occasional escapades followed a somewhat conventional pattern, but nobody could be more exacting about the looks, manners, and general behavior of his womenfolks than he was.

"Don't blame Philip if we were together a good bit of the time." She tried to absolve him, since she knew it was important to him now to continue on good terms with Roy. "I do like his company, and I thought you liked him."

"I do, as a friend, not as a brother-in-law."

"He's never asked to be your brother-in-law." She was telling the truth, but not the whole truth, and once on the alert, Roy was aware of what she was leaving unsaid.

"He's heading in that direction, or was, but Uncle Frank and I are calling a halt. I told him so tonight—Philip I mean— Of course I tried to go slow and easy and chose my words carefully,

but I made it plain to him that Uncle Frank and I both expect him to let you alone."

"Do you think he'll do just what you want?" Missy asked. "Even if it is your fault—and knowing women I bet it is—you must have led him on or he wouldn't have paid you such obvious court. He should know better than to make my sister conspicuous. He told me he didn't realize he had, and he sees my point. He'd better, after all he's living under my roof."

"Does he want to go on living under it if he has to live under your orders? After all, it's part my roof too." She thought Philip might mentally decide he was living under her half of it, and pay only lip service to Roy's dictates.

"Just remember you're under Uncle Frank's wing, and mine until you're twenty-one," Roy said. "And it's up to us to take care of you, and that's what we're doing. Philip understands it. He hasn't enough money to buy red beans! How could he get married? He's willing to stay under my conditions."

"What are they?" she asked.

"They're Uncle Frank's too. Philip's given me his word he won't pay you anything but polite, friendly attention. Otherwise, he'll have to leave here."

Missy wondered how far Philip considered himself bound by a promise extorted from him, and knew how easy it would be for him to contrive ways of avoiding Roy's watchfulness, but he had promised, and she saw, with relief, how much easier it made her line of retreat.

"Philip just didn't realize it puts him in a bad light to make tracks after an heiress. I've fixed up everything with him, and I can write to Uncle Frank and tell him not to worry about it any more, if you're willing to do your part."

"It seems to me I don't have a part. I've been tossed about in your game of battledore and shuttlecock. You haven't given me any say so."

Roy's turquoise eyes studied Missy's face, trying to read her expression. "There's woman's work for you. You can make everything easier and pleasant for Philip and all of us. You don't deny you gave him encouragement, now if you'll just promise not to egg him on."

"I've never egged any man on!"

"Well, discourage him. You know how—I've seen you! If I

could tell Uncle Frank you've agreed to keep strictly on your side of the fence, he'd breathe a lot easier, so would I and so, in the long run, would Philip."

Missy turned a little aside, so Roy would not see her face; she was about to promise, then an idea struck her.

Her silence, and her averted face made Roy get up and come over to her. "Uncle Frank and I aren't trying to ride roughshod over your feelings, you know that—"

"Yes, I know," she murmured.

"I hope to the Lord you aren't in over your depth. Are you?"

Her brother's concern made her feel guilty. "I'll promise, if you're willing to do a little horse trading."

"Trot out your spavined nag."

"You don't have to do anything now, but as soon as you are ready to leave for Europe, as soon as Uncle Frank gets back from Maryland—that's better because you might decide not to go—get our stepfather out of this house and off of Cibola. Don't say it'll hurt Mama's feelings, because she'd rather live in a town, but she won't fend for herself, so you'll have to fend for her. That will give you time to think up some way of getting rid of him without involving her feelings. I'm willing to put up with him a while if I see daylight ahead."

"All right, that's fair enough, I'll trade. After the holidays, I'll work on Mamma—keep her soothed."

"And right now you can soothe Uncle Frank. Tell him you can trust me not to give Philip one single glimmer of encouragement or hope."

"Uncle Frank doesn't want you to droop through the holidays."

"I'll write to him too, then. I—I was too sharp with my horse trading," she confessed. "I'd already made up my mind about Philip. I'm not going to marry him anyway, so you promised under false pretenses."

Roy sat down and laughed. "No, I'm satisfied with my horse trading." He stood up ready to leave, "We'll set Uncle Frank's mind at rest, and all have a fine, rousing Christmas. Come spring, I'll turn Uncle Arnold out to graze." Roy kissed his sister good night, then added, "Cross my heart or hope to die."

Their unlikeness to each other, their differences of taste and opinion could never break the tie between them; sealing his prom-

ise with the old childhood phrase, her brother reminded her of the happy childhood they had shared.

After Roy had left the room, Missy heard him whistling gaily as he went along the gallery. Again, he had, with a few strokes "worked a conjure," and this time she saw what she would gain. The whistling stopped as Roy closed the door to the hall behind him, and she moved on into her own room, roving about aimlessly for a few minutes, pausing to think. Her feeling for Philip, even if it was only a brief illumination like swamp fire, had lent zest to existence, glitter to all parties, mingling with waltz tunes. Now she was feeling an emotional vacuum. Philip's image, fading out, left an empty space in her life.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck, and the twelve crystalline drops of sound reminded her it was time for Cinderella to be her everyday self again. The truth—the unpalatable truth—dawned on Missy. Her deepest instincts had warned her—Philip could never satisfy her heart, but he had satisfied her vanity. A great part of his charm for her, she saw now, had been his ability to convince her of her own power to enchant. He had given her a good conceit of herself. That's what she hated to lose! She was as vain, as easily flattered as Aunt Agnes—mortifying comparison!

Going over to the dressing table, Missy sat down, pulling off her rings, unclasping her bracelet. Facing the mirror in front of her, she thought of Arnold Baring's hard eyes reflected in Halcyon's mirror last night. That reflection seemed to be the only reality left. He had stayed somewhere out of sight, like a puppet master, watching his wooden dolls twirl and pirouette.

Was Philip dancing to his uncle's tune, or Roy's tune or his own? Since she had stopped endowing him with qualities to suit her fancy, she realized how little she knew about his character and motives. The first evening, soon after she had met him, he had given her an impression of complexities in his nature, but very likely that too had been imaginary. Now it was unlikely that she would ever know, ever have a chance to find out what he was, who he was.

The stranger will come, and there the promise ends, and sooner or later reality begins, but if there is any more to the story, the rest of it is never foretold.

Chapter Seven

In November, Mr. Cowan, the senior pilot on the *Great Mogul*, retired. He had kept his eye on the record of a young pilot he had first met on the Ohio, and had known for a long time, and recommended him to the captain, who listened to his advice, signing on Luke Lydell as junior pilot. Besides the high pay, the pilots on the big packets had boundless prestige, with their own kind, with owners, captains, crews, passengers, and everybody else on or along the Mississippi and all the other rivers. Their luster sifted down to stewards, barbers, cooks, and the Negroes who kept up the steam in the gauges. Every creature aboard considered himself above the common herd and his pretensions were accepted as natural and reasonable.

Luke Lydell had been born in Louisville; his family was prosperous and prominent, but he had never been interested in business or planting, or in anything but river life. He had signed on as "cub," had qualified as a pilot on the Ohio, and had found a regular berth first as junior then as senior pilot on the *Cornflower*. By making the requisite number of runs from St. Louis to New Orleans, he had "learned the river." In the spring, he had won his license on the Mississippi, but as he had not found a berth then, he had gone back to the Ohio, taking the *Cornflower* on the run from Louisville to Pittsburgh through the summer, knowing he had only to wait.

In the fall, when the packets swarmed down the river to share the New Orleans trade, the captains scoured the waterways for pilots and bid against one another for their services. Luke had always burned to be on the Mississippi, different from all the rivers in the world, forever changing, unpredictable, challenging, treacherous, and never tamed. Now his chance had come. It was a dazzling height for a man not yet twenty-one to attain. Luke fully relished his good luck, but with the characteristic assurance of the breed, knew he had worked for it, made ready for it, and

could take on the responsibility. When he went on board and shook hands with the captain, he thought the captain was in luck to have him as junior pilot.

It was a gray day late in November when the *Great Mogul* drew away from the St. Louis wharves. Luke was where he had always wanted to be, where he had always been sure he would be, in the glittering pilothouse of a proud Mississippi steamboat, with his hands on the wheel, heading downstream for New Orleans. The captain gave orders until the *Great Mogul* swung into the channel, then his reign was over. The lives of passengers, crew, the valuable cargo, the boat itself, one of the newest, finest, fastest on the river, depended on whichever one of the two pilots happened to be on watch.

Luke was tall, lean, heavily boned; against the light, his brown face, wide across the forehead, with abruptly high cheekbones, looked very dark, hard in its outlines, and helped to give an impression of pride, a touch of hauteur, expected of pilots. His high boots gleamed, his kid gloves were immaculate; his gray trousers, maroon jacket, and silk waistcoat, striped in black, gray, and maroon, had a sober rather than a florid splendor. Though his dark blue eyes blazed with excitement, the onlookers gathered around had a sense of his calm omnipotence, as if he had taken the *Great Mogul* on her run all of his life.

The upper decks and the saloons seethed with people, the lower decks were piled high with freight. Every detail of the *Great Mogul* proclaimed that a fortune had been lavished on the paint and gilding, on the pictures, carpets, stained glass, mirrors, and furniture, on the famous Bridal Suite, done in white satin and gold, draped with white satin hangings. High above the rest of the boat the pilothouse flashed and sparkled. Luke felt not a twinge of doubt. He was sure of his ability to steer the *Great Mogul* through any and every emergency. He had "learned the river," twelve hundred and more miles of the Mississippi.

He knew—as every pilot had to know—the Mississippi's exact shape, from St. Louis to New Orleans, every town, woodyard, bend, reach, towhead, island, chute, every landmark, and recognize them going downstream, recognize them in spite of their different aspect going upstream. Depending on the river's stages, high water, low water, rise, fall, all of these islands, bars, snags

and chutes changed, vanished, or reappeared. The river created new islands, bars, and snags. There were no maps, buoys, lights, or guides of any kind for the pilots; they had to know all of the five hundred shoal places between St. Louis and New Orleans. Passengers, cargo, and packet would reach a safe destination only if the pilot knew every twist and turn of the river's real shape, not as it seemed to be, as it was—as he knew it was. He had nothing to follow at night except the pattern cut indelibly in his memory. The Mississippi could and did fool his eyes every minute; he had to defy its witchcraft.

Luke was mentally reviewing the stretch from Vicksburg to Natchez, and his memory led to Tanglewild Landing. Since the first time he had made the run as guest pilot to "look at the river," he had passed it going up and going downstream, in daylight and darkness, in a diversity of weathers and seasons. Once he had gone by it at midnight, in February, with the full moon icily spangling the water, giving the loneliness of river and swamp a sinister magic. He thought of the last time he had seen the landing, a few months ago, on a summer day. From the pilothouse he had watched the river's torpid meanderings; under a pale burning sun the water had flashed with a dragon-scale glitter. On the left, the Louisiana shore had showed as an endless tangle of matted vines, limp-leaved willows and cypresses and cottonwoods, blurred in the tremors of the heat haze, smudged against the sky like a roll of low-lying smoke.

The *Eclipse* had steamed along Tanglewild Reach, and had stopped at Tanglewild Landing—a square chopped out of the surrounding swamp, with a warehouse built on stilts and a road wandering over the levee. Mule-drawn wagons and a group of Negroes had been waiting for the boat. The roustabouts had hauled barrels and boxes ashore, the men on the bank had loaded the supplies in the wagons, and as the wagons had rattled out of sight the hubbub had died.

Luke had stayed at the pilothouse window. The cottonwoods, growing close to the water, stretched away on either side of the landing. On the other side of the levee more trees made a screen. Except for the warehouse, the road and the levee—each planter kept up his own—nothing indicated cultivated acres within miles. The *Eclipse* had been almost ready to leave when a girl had come

galloping out of the cottonwoods and halted her lively little chestnut mare near the edge of the river bank.

Luke had been able to see her clearly as she had turned toward him to look up at the boat, and could see her now in his memory, her lips a little parted from her hurry, her eyes half-closed against the glare. In the burnished reflections beating up from the water her face had looked golden. She had held the reins lightly in one hand, and he had noticed the relaxed stillness of her body in the saddle. He had also noticed one bare foot showing from beneath her full calico skirts. She had displayed her toes with casual unconcern to the well-shod passengers on the decks. Instead of being on her head, her sunbonnet, tied by its strings around her neck, had dangled over her shoulder.

He remembered her hair as a pale, shiny light-blurred maze blended against the light, and the flower she had worn in it, tucked behind her ear, a smoky rose-red flower; at first Luke had not realized what it was, then he had recognized it as a cotton blossom. They opened greenish white and turned red the second day. He had wondered who she was, where she had come from and where she belonged. The chestnut mare had obviously been a fine horse, but the girls Luke knew, certainly the young ladies he knew, never rambled any distance alone. When they rode, it was with a groom, or some male relative, or an approved young man. This girl seemed to belong to the woods and the summertime. The *Eclipse* had moved away from the landing, but he had gone on looking at the girl, and had waved to her. She must have caught a glimpse of him, because she had waved in response. The tawny water had widened between them. Girl and horse had become indistinct, then had vanished in a fiery dance of sunlight.

He had never been able to escape from her; every time he thought of that stretch of the river, she reappeared, part of the fixed pattern he had learned. On the *Great Mogul*, he would see Tanglewild Landing at all hours, in all seasons. Going upriver, the boats steamed along Tanglewild Reach before they made Tanglewild Landing. If the sky was without any clouds or haze, the pilots could see the spire of the cathedral in Natchez the entire length of the reach. If the sky was overcast it was invisible, but the pilots knew the spire was there. In the same way,

Luke felt sure that the girl must be there, where she belonged. Sooner or later, the *Great Mogul* would blow for a landing, and stop at Tanglewild to load cotton or unload cargo. Sooner or later, the girl would come to the river bank again.

Soon after he reached Memphis, Frank had Roy's letter to reassure him. "*The whole question of M. and P. is cleared up,*" Roy had written. "*Do not worry about her moping and pining. P. is in love, but we made a mistake to think she was, or she would never have promised to give him up. She does not care a fig for him.*" A letter from Missy followed, and she concluded it with: "*You have nothing to fear from Mr. X.*"

Frank was convinced she was not in love with him now, but he thought she had cared at least a little for Philip, and had changed toward him, for some reason, or no reason at all. He hoped so, because if she had never cared at all she might learn to care. If she had changed, she was not likely to fall in love with him all over again. One thing Frank was sure of, neither his decree or worldly considerations had affected her feelings.

The doctors who had called Frank into consultation followed the treatment he suggested and the remedies he prescribed, and within a week the patient's fever broke. One of Frank's methods in fever cases was considered an innovation by his colleagues. He had first been emboldened to try it from an experience years ago, when Missy, then about eight, had come down with a fever. Frank had been following the medical dictates he knew by forbidding her to have more than a few drops of water or tea.

One night, the child, wild with thirst, had slipped out of bed when Aunt Dora had dozed off, and had found a pail of cool cistern water just outside her door. As she afterward confessed, she had gulped dipper after dipper full. In twenty-four hours, her fever had begun to break. Frank had meditated over the astounding result, not sure whether it was only coincidence. Contrary as it was to all medical procedure, he had given his next fever-stricken patient, who had been desperately ill, all the liquid he could swallow, and the man had recovered. Since then, Frank had concluded it was only sensible procedure and had incorporated it into his treatment.

At the time of Missy's illness it had not occurred to him to suspect Aunt Dora. Later he had wondered if she had not

brought Missy the water, either because she hated to see the child tormented by thirst, or because her instinct had told her to put out fire with water. He had never asked her and she had never admitted it outright, but she had admitted that she had given both Roy and Missy potlicker at an early age. They had both flourished on it.

With his patient regaining strength and appetite, Frank found he could leave Memphis sooner than he had expected. When he drove through the streets to the river front he was in high spirits, ready to enjoy the Christmas holidays at home. The crowds of people, the tangle of horses, drays, carriages, and vehicles of all kinds, the bawling and clanging and tumult at the wharves reminded him that business was good, the price of cotton was high, and Christmas was near.

Children were getting excited about Santa Claus; young ladies were feverishly netting purses, embroidering, painting flowers on china, molding them out of wax, planning holiday festivities and holiday finery, and marshaling their beaux. In his mind's eye, Frank could see the smoke curling out of every chimney at home, out of all the cabin chimneys. Squirrels and rabbits were stewing, simmering on cabin fires, and many a fat possum was roasting on hot embers, ringed with sweet yellow yams.

People were streaming off and on all the steamboats. The roustabouts were loading cotton on the packets going downriver, jamming the bales on the decks, piling them against cabin windows; the cotton was bound for New Orleans, to be exported to foreign looms, hungry for it. As he joined the passengers thronging on board, Frank thought the *Great Mogul* made a fine sight, with red chimneys, bright pictures painted on the paddle boxes, ornamental white railings on the decks, and a resplendence of glitter. The boat's name was displayed in big shaded gold letters, haloed by long golden rays. Open furnace doors showed fires glaring; the pilothouse was a fantastic glass castle.

The decks and saloons seethed with people. A wedding party showered rice on the bride and groom coming aboard. She was a pretty little thing in her going-away finery, with what Frank thought was an overpowering mass of ostrich plumes billowing on her bonnet. One of the pilots, Mr. Walter Welch, was from Natchez. Frank knew him, and knew his family well, and soon went up to the pilothouse to see him. "Mighty glad you're along,

Doctor," Mr. Welch greeted him as they shook hands and offered to beat Frank at chess, but the game would have to wait until Welch was off watch.

Welch was a man in his early thirties, short and fat, with several chins and the well-known "river man's" bulge developing. Besides being an A-1 pilot, he was a fine chess player and a good musician. He and Frank talked about Mr. Cowan, the former senior pilot, now retired, and reminisced about some of his exploits.

"Who've you got with you now as your junior?" Frank asked.

"Luke Lydell. He's young, but he's got quite a name already on the Ohio," Walter Welch told him.

There were not any guest pilots. Two had come aboard at St. Louis to "look at the river," but had left at Memphis to take berths on other packets. None of the reputable pilots had much idle time at this season, particularly this fall when trade was brisk and captains were combing waterfronts, bayous, and minor rivers to find them. Frank thought that every boy born, every normal boy, who had spent his childhood near a river, within sight and sound of the steamboats, had a yearning to be a pilot. Most of them kept some flickering of it all of their lives. Frank had a strong spark of it left; once on a steamboat, he spent most of his time in the pilothouse.

He was still there, talking to Walter Welch, when Luke came on watch. After they were introduced, Frank said he had met a Dr. John Lydell, from Louisville, and found out that Dr. Lydell was this young man's uncle. He was a very young man, Frank thought, to have the position he now held. Walter Welch went off to take his ease until the next watch. The captain gave his orders. Bells clanged, the *Great Mogul* left the wharf, backed into the channel, heading south. From that moment, the captain became a figurehead. Until Welch came back, all these lives, all the cotton and cargo, the imperial *Mogul* itself became the unshared responsibility of this Luke Lydell, age twenty-one or less.

Nobody on earth, not even the President of the United States, dared give orders to a pilot, neither orders nor advice. It was a bold captain who ventured to offer the merest suggestion. The pilots had absolute power. By the time a pilot had his license,

he could be trusted not to wilt in time of danger. His passengers could be sure he had the necessary memory and training, but only a crisis could prove his ability to decide, judge, make a choice. Luke Lydell looked intelligent, his comments, questions, and curiosity showed his mental alertness. He was eager to hear what Frank had to tell him about Natchez, Vicksburg, and St. Clair, and his own experiences as a doctor in the swamp.

So Dr. Arden lived at Halcyon, the next landing to Tanglewild. He knew that country from the inside, not just from the veiled glimpses, always tantalizing to Luke as he had passed and repassed on a steamboat. Vague, blurred, flat, formless, only the river coiling through it gave the swamp any definition, only the rivers had any visible movement. Frank and Luke discussed the time before the steamboats had come. The flatboats had been able to go downstream on the current, but there had been no way to get them upstream again. They had been broken up in New Orleans and sold for lumber.

The keelboats had been rowed, poled, or pulled by ropes from the bank, interminable and tedious work. In those days, most travelers going North had to take the overland trails, usually the Natchez Trace, haunted by robbers and murderers. The swamp country was opening up fast, Frank said. "They're clearing land, planting cotton out there, in spite of the risk of being flooded out with the overflow from Tensas and Brushy Bayou and all the rest of those waterways. They risk more than losing a crop, too, that's fever country. Settlements are springing up along the bayous, and settlements along the Mississippi are getting to be towns."

St. Clair was an example. It had once consisted of a few squalid waterfront taverns where keelboatmen, flatboatmen, and river pirates had stopped to brawl, knife one another and get drunk, en route to the lusher vices of Natchez Under the Hill. "I can't remember the wild times," Frank said, "but I remember when it looked to me like a small dirt-dauber's nest. Now it's become respectable, with churches, schools and some good houses. Good-sized ships, some from foreign countries, dock there at the wharves."

The Mississippi had made the earth rich, cotton had made the people rich, the steamboats took the cotton to market, and

the pilots ran the steamboats. They knew their own importance, and so did everybody else.

The pilothouse on the *Great Mogul* was big and comfortable, with fringed red and gold curtains, sofas and chairs upholstered in Spanish leather, and a glowing stove. The wheel was decorated with inlaid work, all the brass was polished to a bright glitter. Walter Welch had set out his carved ivory chessmen and had hung up his guitar. One of the Negro waiters, called a texas-tender, had nothing else to do but bring trays of pie, cake, sandwiches, coffee and iced drinks to the pilots and their guests. Up here, there was an expansive view of the Mississippi's intricate loops. A log floating by showed the river was rising—the December rise out of the Ohio, early this year, bringing out all the small craft, coal barges, trading scows, rafts, and broadhorns. The pilots cursed the sight of them.

"The rascals are a damned blasted nuisance after sundown," Luke said. "By law they are required to keep a light burning, but ninety-nine out of a hundred don't fash themselves. On a black night they'll dart right across the bow, and you'll be put to it not to run them down."

Frank smiled, he had his own experience of the casualness of the families crowded on rafts and broadhorns. He watched Luke's hands on the wheel; they were square, large-boned hands, indicating a powerful grip, though their touch was light and easy as he steered. His skin, naturally dark, was deeply tanned, his face was strongly modeled, broad across the brow and eyes, with a large, well-cut mouth, and a clear, hard outline of jaw and chin and cheekbones. But his face still had the smoothness of youth; there was not a mark on it of time or experience, and when he laughed as he was laughing now at Frank's description of some of his encounters with the inhabitants of the broadhorns, Luke looked what he was—a boy.

He was taking the *Mogul* flying through the channel on a strong current, thinking that if the river kept on rising at this rate, there must be plenty of water already in the next towhead. Of course the steamboats never took the chutes going downstream, and there was no way to tell yet if there would be enough water to run the chutes going up. The river might have fallen by then, though as he remarked to Frank, the rise was not only earlier, but higher than it had been this time last year.

The sunset folded dim blue and rose-violet veils over the shores, and turned the dull water to gold. Frank stood near Luke, where he could get a good view, and gave himself up to enjoying it. Luke saw a thin slanted finger, the slightest mark, a shade dimmer than the sleek brilliance elsewhere, and steered well away from it. After they had passed, Frank asked, "Why did you give it such a wide berth? Isn't it just a shadow?"

"It's a sand bar, sir. There's shoal water at the head of it."

There was a bar under every point. The current swirling around the point makes an eddy; the sediment sinks, then slowly builds up. Luke pointed out a cluster of faint wrinkles, as if a sharp pencil had carelessly scratched a few thin strokes. "They tell you little reefs are there—that bar is making in a hurry! If it keeps on stretching out in the channel, it'll give us plenty of trouble."

The gauzy shores suddenly thickened, became a dense, solemn purple, flinging the shadow of the lonely woods on the water's smooth gold. To the right, the shadow was deepest, and just where it was darker than the surrounding area, a patch of bright, quicksilver ripplings darted, the sudden lively sheen accenting the somberness of the shore, the duskiness stealing over the river. "There's new snag," Luke said. "In a bad place for it."

Ahead, though not far ahead, Frank caught sight of a steely finger pointing out on the water's surface. He thought it was giving warning of another sand bar, and since it was a longer thread, he guessed it hid a larger bar. Luke was paying no attention to it. He neither slowed the engines nor turned the wheel; he was steering straight on. Frank wondered if he saw it, but dared not ask him. Luke's air of authority impressed him, yet Frank felt a few uneasy twinges. Suppose this boy, inexperienced in this run, was about to pile the boat into shoal water and ground her on a bar? Heedless of that dim warning finger, Luke took the *Mogul* to it, over it, beyond it, full steam downriver. Relaxing from his tension, Frank asked what the line had meant. "It looked just like the one showing a sand bar."

Luke smiled, showing very white teeth in his brown face. "That was just a wind reef, sir."

Frank envied him his cool certainty. Doctors were often baffled, so with experience, they learned a due humility, or should. Meekness, diffidence, were not appropriate virtues in a pilot.

They too had to make lightning-flash decisions, with often enough a hairline balance between one choice and another. If they made a wrong one, a big packet gone aground, or stuck in a chute, was a conspicuous error. It was glaring but not fatal, except perhaps to the pilot's career, unless a snag tore the boat's hull. Even then, the people aboard had some chance. As the river traffic grew, so did the disasters, through no fault of the pilots. The great loss of life on the rivers was due to steamboat explosions and fires raging out of control.

During the next day, more passengers got off at various landings than came aboard. The holiday-minded were scattering to the plantations. Another throng would get on at Vicksburg, still another at Natchez, and all the towns down the river, but this one brief afternoon and evening, the saloons and cabins were less crowded. Mrs. Robards, with her five-year-old twin girls, and a baby in long clothes, stayed on. Her destination was a plantation a little below Vicksburg. Frank knew her husband, but had never met her, until she asked for him to come to her croupy baby.

Frank had stayed with the baby a good part of the night, until he had broken up the attack of croup. He slept late into the next day, then was too wide awake to go to bed early that night. He was in the pilothouse when Luke came on watch at ten o'clock, and lingered on to talk to him a while. The texas-tender brought more strong coffee, trays of sandwiches, cake, and hot mince pie. Luke spoke to Frank, and took the wheel. Walter Welch paused to eat a slice of cake and a wedge of pie. "It's black as the bottom of a doodle bug hole out yonder; 'most ran down a damn' raft, nary a light did they show." He told Frank good night, and went down, singing as he went.

A few stars showed dimly, but there was no fog or mist on the river. Frank asked where they were just now. Luke answered, "Abreast of Colby's woodyard, sir." In about half an hour, if no fog came up, he would make Live Indian Point, on the Louisiana side. He thought they would get to Halcyon Landing about noon the following day, if the boat didn't make too many stops. The captains of the big packets didn't like to make stops; the *Great Mogul's* captain refused to take the trouble except for big plantations, or to load cotton, or to please important people.

There ought to be more small packets on the Mississippi, he

and Frank agreed, to make shorter runs. They weren't as fast or as luxurious as the big boats. Planters and merchants with their wives and daughters wanted to travel in style, wanted to meet their friends, and wanted to get where they were going in a hurry. Country folks too liked the lavishness of the *Eclipse*, the *Great Mogul* and the other "floating palaces."

"Even so," Frank said, "every time I've taken one of the smaller boats, it's been loaded—even overloaded." He used them often, to get to his patients, if he had time to wait on them. "Their comings and goings are too erratic."

Luke said he had studied their schedules, and they could be tightened up. That should be their great advantage, being able to get freight and passengers from one town to another and all points in between in a short time.

"I should think the best captains, the best pilots all want to be on packets of this type," Frank said, "not only for the pay, but for the glory."

Luke admitted that he and a friend of his had often talked of owning a small packet, and making it pay. It could be done, if all dawdling was cut out, if the boat was outfitted like the *Great Mogul* or the *Eclipse* on a smaller scale, with two mirrors instead of ten—and such a boat could make a specialty of handling perishable freight. The roustabouts would have to be carefully picked and trained, but that could be done. That sort of packet would soon attract the best captains and pilots.

Frank said he was sure a boat, or boats like that would make a fortune for the owners. "They must be satisfied with the money they're making now, and don't hump themselves."

"It would take a sizable lump of capital, but if you owned it and ran it you would hump yourself." Luke was fired with his plan. Someday he would try it.

"Capital, yes—" Frank mused. "But anything with scope would attract enough people with money to invest."

Frank thought that Luke could impress likely investors. He was efficient, and he knew the river. That's how fortunes were made—someone was alert enough to see a need and supply it.

"I'd like making a run from one point to another on the lower Mississippi even better than the St. Louis–New Orleans run," Luke said. "It's the most interesting part of the river for a pilot, at least it is to me."

Frank understood what he meant. The boy was practical in a way; he wanted to succeed, to make money, but what he wanted most was to pilot a steamboat on the stretch of the Mississippi which he found challenging—the most challenging.

Luke was suddenly very still. Frank saw his dark face become taut, his eyes were searching the darkness beyond the windows. Frank looked out too, at the clouded darkness. "If a fog's settling down, that means we'll be tied up, won't we?"

"That's no fog, sir. That's smoke." Luke rang the bell. "Smell it." Voices answered the clanging bells. Frank leaped to his feet and opened the door, getting the pungent, singed cloth odor, seeing a thin white furry mist drifting up.

"Cotton's on fire." Luke was ringing the bells again, and steering the boat slantwise to the right. The captain burst in, panting, the mate right behind him.

"I'm going to land, sir," Luke told him, "at Live Indian Point. There's plenty of water." Luckily, there was no need to take soundings, as there would be no time for that.

"Aren't you being mighty cautious, Mr. Lydell? All because a few bales of cotton set up a smolder, and they've already been thrown overboard." The captain's cheeks puffed in and out with his heavy breathing.

"I'm going to land, sir, and keep the boat headed into the bank until all the smoke is gone—if it goes. If it hasn't gone by that time, you'll be able to put the gangplank out and get your passengers and crew ashore."

He spoke in an even, civilized tone, Frank noticed, without any display of anger, but his face was as hard as if it had been cut out of rock. He gave the captain one glance as he spoke to him, then didn't pay any more attention to him, dismissing him conclusively. The captain panted, but kept quiet. Luke was steering the *Great Mogul* on the course he had chosen, toward the unseen shore.

The senior pilot had come in, still hunching himself into his clothes and struggling with buttons. His thick black hair was rumpled into a peak, and his guitar was slung around his neck. He had listened without saying a word himself. Looking at his watch, he began to gather up his chessmen, stuffing them in his pockets. Luke rang the bells again and spoke to the mate. "Mr. Davis, make sure nobody jumps off anywhere near the paddle

wheels, keep them from jumping—tell them they have time to take the gangplank to shore. Get the cotton away from the bow —as much of it as you can, and try to keep the fire from spreading there."

To hold the boat nosed into the bank, the engines had to go on working. As long as the engines worked, the paddle wheels would be turning. Anyone who jumped or fell near them would be sucked into them by the strong current; the wheels would crunch bones into powder, tear flesh into mangled, bloody rags.

The captain had gone from the pilothouse with the mate. As Luke was well aware, pilots didn't win luster by being more prudent than they had to be. Skill combined with boldness gave them their acclaim. He knew that if he made for the bank after one or two smoking cotton bales had been jettisoned and there was no sign of fire by the time he reached the bank, he would be jeered at by every riverman on the Mississippi, the Ohio, the Missouri and all their tributaries. It would be not a blot, but a blur on his flourishing career to the end of his life, yet to the end of his life, if he had the decision to make over again, even knowing the outcome, again he would land the *Great Mogul* at Live Indian Point.

There were now about ninety-five passengers on board, besides the crew. If all the burning cotton hadn't been put out, or jettisoned, there would not be much time. Once a fire on a steamboat made any headway, it only took minutes, or less for it to flash beyond control. Outside the windows, the white furry smoke was thicker rather than thinner. The smell was as strong as ever.

"I'll have the *Mogul* headed into the bank at five minutes past midnight, gentlemen." Luke smiled at Frank Arden and Walter Welch.

The senior pilot muttered, "Burning cotton's tricky."

Frank agreed, watching the smoke cloud the windows. The odor was getting biting, acid, beginning to claw his throat, even up here. He was glad shore was as near as it was, thankful Luke had decided as he had, and opened his mouth to say so, then closed it. That young man didn't need anyone's opinion to bolster his own!

"I'm going down to see if I can be of any use. Is there anything particular you want me to do?"

"Tell the passengers I'll land in about ten more minutes. Tell them they will have time to go off by the gangplank—don't let them get excited and jump. Herd them all forward, sir, and take care of yourself. I'll see you on Live Indian Point, Doctor."

Luke's lazy, assured voice made Frank shiver. The boy would stay there, whatever happened, until everyone else had left the *Great Mogul*. "I'll see to them," he said, and went out.

Walter Welch followed him as far as the door. "Don't wait too long, Doctor, to get yourself off. The ole man wants to make Vicksburg on time. That's why he was so damned buttheaded as to say the fire was out, and that's the only reason." He went back in the pilothouse again.

Frank hurried down to the texas deck, then took the steps to the hurricane deck below, where the smoke was forming in ever-thickening layers. The mate was bawling orders, the crew was scurrying, the men shouting directions to one another. Frank sprinted along the corridors to Mrs. Robards' cabin. Just as he reached her door, she came out, with her baby in her arms, and the two little girls clinging to her. "What's going on, Doctor?"

"Don't go back for anything, ma'am. Start walking forward as fast as you can. I'll get your cloaks."

He saw a wisp of smoke seeping in at the door leading to the deck. A thin wisp of smoke, wavering forward, an ominous, ghostly precursor. He darted into the cabin, seized the cloaks hanging in view, snatched up the blankets, rejoined Mrs. Robards, took the baby from her, and urged her on toward the bow. Bells were clanging, the engines were slowing, and the boat nosed slowly into the bank. It was a cold night for croupy babies, brides, and old ladies to be routed out of warm staterooms and hauled on to a muddy river bank in the swamp. They were lucky they had reached the shore, Frank thought, and there were worse spots along the shore than Live Indian Point, which could boast of a little settlement, half a dozen shacks, a storehouse on tall stilts, and a lean-to built of odds and ends of lumber, serving as a tavern.

There were worse places to be, and the worst of all would be the *Great Mogul*. The smoke was no longer white, it rolled dull umber, streaked here and there with rusty yellow. The passengers were choking and coughing. The crewmen had put out

the gangplank, Frank saw, and had begun to lead the people to it through the acrid, blinding wall of smolder. A girl fainted. Frank gave Mrs. Robards' baby to a sensible-looking woman just ahead in the waiting line, while the mother clung to the twins. Frank told her to go when her turn came. "No matter what, don't jump."

He brought the girl to, made her stand up, get back in line, and ordered her to hold on to the hand of the woman supporting her. He smiled at the little bride, who was reluctant to let go of her husband's arm and take her place with the group of women and children. "He'll be ashore soon," Frank reassured her, and turned back to try to calm an old woman standing in the doorway, screeching she was not going to budge. Her scant gray hair was screwed back from her face and twisted into knobs of curl papers. She was a witchlike figure seen vaguely through the smoke; she was in a long flannel nightgown, with a scraggly shawl over her shoulders, but around her neck a magnificent diamond necklace blazed. "My jewels—" she shrilled. "Somebody must go back and get my jewels, or I won't leave!"

"Nobody can go back, ma'am." Frank began to propel her forward. "And you can't stay here." One of the Negro stewards briskly but kindly echoed, "Sho cain't, ma'am," and steered her on to the gangplank. In the saloons, the mirrors were fogged over, the gilding faded, blotted out in smoke. The *Great Mogul* was still alive, the engines throbbed on. The passengers, waiting for their turn, shrank from the growing heat.

A flicker, no bigger than a candle tip showed through the murk, danced idly, was joined by another. They danced together, grew taller; other tips of fire moved and met them, became a line of flame. Their laziness changed, and they began to leap. More flame broke free, climbed quickly. The women and children were filing across the gangplank. The passengers waiting to go pressed forward, staring at the fire. A child was whimpering, the old witch was still screaming about her jewels in the cabin. Most of the people were quiet and orderly. Nobody had to urge them to the shore now. Frank thought of the pilots, with the fire reaching for them. An elderly man with bristling walrus mustaches was muttering "God help 'em."

The stewards and crewmen went on repeating "plenty of time,"

to the passengers, though they all knew there was not plenty of time, or much time—maybe not enough for everyone still on the *Great Mogul.* The men who had been trying to jettison the burning bales had retreated. The crew, battling to hold the fire back from the bow, would soon have to give up their fight. The flames were making a tawny-orange patch on the water, lighting up the straggle of shacks threaded along the curve of the point. Fishermen and trappers with their wives and children lived there. They began to stir and mutter. Their lean dogs woke them.

By the dull, smoky lamplight, four men in the tavern were playing poker and drinking whiskey. One of them saw the faces and numbers of the grimy cards in his hand suddenly grow bright. He looked up, looked around, looked out of the window and saw the sky before he saw the river. Shaking his head, he muttered to himself, "'Tain't sunup," and decided he was not only mighty damn' drunk, but mighty damn' crazy along with it. "Couldn't no po' man's whiskey make sech sights nohow—" Then he flung down his cards, yelling, "Gawd A'mighty! Look a yonder! The *GREAT MOGUL!*" He went leaping to the river bank, the others racing after him. The dogs were howling. The people in the shacks, waking, stared and went tumbling and running to the water's edge.

The fire's reflections played on the big golden letters spelling out the steamboat's name, and the long golden rays around it, more brilliant, more gorgeous than ever before, flared in the lurid light to glitter against the black sky and shine in the blacker water. The people from the shacks took the women and children in to shelter. The men stayed to watch, and to lend a hand if anyone needed help. Frank Arden was the last passenger to leave. The crew followed him off. The engines throbbed, keeping the paddle wheels turning. Luke Lydell was still holding the *Mogul* to the bank. The glass windows in the pilothouse flashed and sparkled as the fire swept up.

Strikers, engineers, and firemen came tearing across the gangplank. The captain followed them. He looked up waving his arms, signaling the pilots to come. The group huddled together on the bank grew silent, except for a woman sobbing, another muttering prayers. Some of the men had pulled off their boots and waited poised to dive in the water to help the pilots ashore

—if they were ever seen again. The engines still revolved, the wheels turned. Flames spiraled, rippled together, hiding the pilothouse from the tense watchers. The bow blazed up.

Luke took his hands from the wheel when Welch told him that the captain had signaled. Welch sighed, took off the guitar he had slung around his neck, and hung it on its accustomed hook. He and Luke ran down to the texas deck, keeping the lower part of their faces covered, so as not to breathe in the fire and smoke, using the *Mogul's* big embroidered napkins, wet with cold coffee. Sparks shimmered and fell all around them; the deck was burning their feet through their boots. The flames rushed, roared, hissed behind them, below them, catching up with them.

They had to go into the fire to dive free of the decks, and made the hurricane deck. They saw it was too late to go any farther. The fire had spread all over the boiler deck below them. They knew their danger from the boiler pipe—any moment now, it would break. The two men headed for the stern, on the downstream side, to avoid the full strength of the current—the current that would try to drag them under the boat's hull. Luke was lean, tall, long-legged, and long-winded. He saw Welch begin to lag, seized his arm, and drew him on to the deck rail. Once in the water, he would be all right. They must get in the water, before the pipe broke. Welch pulled off his jackets—in cold weather he wore two—and his boots. Luke did the same. The two men dived in the river, came up, and swam in a wide arc around the boat, well away from the wheel, swimming under water to escape the burning fragments of wood skyrocketing from the *Mogul.*

The group on the bank heard the boiler pipe explode, saw the steam and the fury of the fire. When at last they caught sight of Walter Welch and Luke swimming to shore, a wild shout went up. Once they were on the bank, neither of the pilots wanted to see the blazing *Mogul.* Wrapped in the cloaks and blankets someone had brought to them, they went with Frank Arden to the tavern, where the captain had already gone. He shook hands with his pilots. "You were right, sir," he said to Luke.

Luke answered, "This time, sir, I wish I had been wrong."

Glum and silent, captain, mate, pilots, and Frank slumped by the fire and swallowed raw whiskey. None of them spoke. Some-

day they would want to talk about it, Luke thought, but not now. Someday they would be pointing out how much worse it could have been—one of the horrors on the river, the too frequent disasters. No lives had been lost. At the moment, even that gave Luke no real satisfaction—none of it need have happened if that damn' cotton— Certainly he took no pride in his own good judgment. Any fool would have known enough to take the *Mogul* to the bank.

Without the pilot's hands to hold the wheel and keep the boat nosed into the bank, the *Mogul* had begun to slip back, sliding away from shore. The blazing gangplank crumpled into the water. The steampipe had broken and the wheels had stopped turning. The *Great Mogul* drifted, swinging on the current, turned broadside to the bank. Fire crawled around the latticed railings, lapped up paint and gilding, cracked the mirrors, broke the stained glass into charred fragments, devoured the white satin hangings in the Bridal Suite, and decked the boat with wild waving banners. The glass windows in the pilothouse glowed like rubies, melted, the pilothouse toppled and fell. The chimneys crashed, flames gushed up, painting the river in savage colors, unfurling fronded plumes against the sky.

In Vicksburg, people had packed to take the *Great Mogul.* In the morning the crowd would gather at the waterfront. People would say to themselves and one another, with absolute certainty, "I'm going—we're going—to this or that plantation, or Natchez, or Bayou Sara or New Orleans on the *Great Mogul.*" Hours would pass, the crowd would grow restless, grumble, then wonder. Why was the fast packet—advertised as the fastest—so late? Seasoned rivermen would remember when other big packets had been too long overdue, and why. Too late could mean never.

And the *Great Mogul* would never again blow for a landing, nobody up or down the Mississippi would ever see the glitter proclaiming that majestic name, or hear the long full sound reverberating from shore to shore, heralding the *Mogul's* comings and goings along the river. Nobody would ever see her come steaming to the wharves at Vicksburg, or glide to a stop at St. Clair or Tanglewild Landing, or Natchez, or New Orleans. Only a blackened skeleton would wander downstream to founder on some lonely sand bar.

Chapter Eight

At sundown, Aunt Dora went out to put up her chickens before night. One eluded her, so she walked around her cabin to watch the road, looking for someone to catch her hen for her. She had been in the cabin all day, but she knew that Roy and Philip had gone to Markham plantation to stay until tomorrow, knew that Dr. Baring had set out for St. Clair, and that the rest of the family were at home. She had heard two steamboats coming upriver, recognizing the *Penelope*, then the *City of New Orleans*, blowing for Tanglewild Landing, bringing mail, packages, and supplies.

Catching sight of Little Joe, she hailed him, and told him to round up her hen. He obeyed, and after a chase, shut the hen in with the other chickens. The sun dropped behind the big oak; the owl flew out of the branches, a blur of velvet darkness and silence against the sky's dim gold burnish. A sudden chill came in the air. The black tomcat stalked to the door, ready to go back to the fire. A steamboat, coming downriver, was swinging around Halcyon Point, blowing for Halcyon Landing. Aunt Dora said the *Great Mogul* was mighty late.

All the packets were late, Little Joe reminded her. This time of year they did a lot of hauling, and folks did a heap of traipsing. The boat blew again. Listening to the hollow echoes die away, Aunt Dora told him it was not the *Great Mogul;* it was the *Robert V. Lambert*, she could tell from the sound of it. Little Joe realized it too, and agreed. His grandmother ordered him to make tracks for Halcyon Landing. If he was late getting back to the house, tell his Uncle Isaiah she had sent him. Sometimes, if the boat had to stop at Halcyon, it put off mail or cargo for Cibola there, to avoid making another stop at Tanglewild.

Little Joe gloried in his errand, he loved to go to the landing to see the boats come and go. He sprinted to the stables, saddled a mule, and loped off as fast as the mule would take him. Instead

of going inside, Aunt Dora paced up and down the cabin porch, back and forth, her cat at her heels. She had lived all of her life by the river, and all of her life she had heard the stories of the steamboat tragedies. Burned deep was her memory of the night the *Pannonia* had exploded. The *Great Mogul*, due around midday, had not yet come by sundown. It had never been so late before, but the lateness was not what made her uneasy.

It was the other packet, coming ahead of the *Great Mogul*. The *Robert V. Lambert*, smaller and slower, had started later, from the same place, meeting the same weather, the same crowds, yet the *Lambert* had arrived. Then where was the big fine packet, always faster, always first? Such a thing had never happened before so why had it happened now? Then she knew Dr. Frank Arden was coming back soon, though nobody knew which one of the packets he would take. It seemed to her a long time before Little Joe came back. By then she was sitting by the fire, reading her Bible.

He had been too late, Little Joe reported. By the time he had reached the landing, the boat had already drawn away. It hadn't brought anything from way up yonder for Cibola, but it had brought the doctor back from Memphis. Was he sure? Sure it was the doctor? Of course he was sure, Little Joe insisted. He had passed Halcyon's carriage, with Cornelius at the reins, driving away from the landing. Dr. Arden had poked his head out and called, "Evenin', Joe." Didn't he know the doctor when he had seen him and heard him? There had been another gentleman in the carriage too, Little Joe added, but he hadn't had a good look at him. He stopped what he was saying, puzzled by his grandmother's solemn manner. Once she believed he had seen the doctor, she paid no more attention to anyone else he had seen. She whispered to herself, "Thank the Lord."

Little Joe muttered he'd put his foot in the road and get on to the house, or his Uncle Isaiah would lay him so flat the ants couldn't find him. Here it was black nighttime. The *Great Mogul* was mighty late coming. His grandmother turned and looked at the boy. "Mebbe it ain't never goin' to come, never no more."

At Halcyon, Lucie had heard the boat blowing. She had no way of knowing when Frank would leave Memphis, or what boat he would take, but from his last letter, she could expect him any time. He had written that he would try to get on the next fast

packet. He might have made the *Great Mogul*, due late today, or the *Eclipse*, due tomorrow. A steamboat—the *Great Mogul*, since it was expected—was going to stop at Halcyon Landing. She had better go to the landing, she decided, in case Frank was on board. Drawing up to the door, Cornelius told her that it was not the *Mogul* she had heard but the *Lambert*. As soon as he had said so, she knew he was right. She doubted if Frank would be on the *Lambert*—he had said a fast packet—but she sent the carriage, though she stayed at the house herself, sure it was fruitless to go.

Catching a steamboat was a haphazard business. For the next few days, Cornelius was apt to spend most of his time parading the carriage back and forth to the landing, while she spent hers redoing her hair and changing into a dress she knew Frank liked, instead of getting ahead with the heavy work of Christmas preparations—until Frank himself appeared.

Uncertain as steamboat schedules were, it occurred to Lucie that it was strange for the *Lambert* to precede the *Mogul* downriver. Maybe Cornelius was mistaken. No, he never was about the sound of the different packets. Before she had time to think about it, Frank's old hound began to bark, racing with the other dogs to meet the carriage. Lucie went out on the gallery, and caught a glimpse of the lamps, coming, not turning to the stables, coming to the house. She saw Frank, leaning halfway out of the carriage window, waving wildly. She ran down the steps, calling out, "So you did come! Oh, I wish I'd gone to the landing! I didn't dare expect you!"

"Never mind—" Frank was out of the carriage before Cornelius had reined in the horses. "We're all home now." He flung his arms around her, kissing her several times before he let her go.

She said, "I believe you're fairly glad to be home, sir!"

"You don't know how glad!"

Something in his voice made Lucie want to burst into tears, but when she looked up she saw that Frank had brought someone with him. He had stepped out of the carriage, and was standing a little aside, waiting. Light and shadow gave her an impression of height, of a dark face, and darkly glittering eyes. He was someone she had never seen before. Frank introduced the

stranger. "This is Mr. Luke Lydell, from Louisville. I've persuaded him to spend Christmas with us, and I'm counting on you to help me keep him considerably longer."

"We'll try our best," Lucie smiled, holding out her hand. "You're very welcome, Mr. Lydell." He was young, she saw, very young, and yet— Luke took her outstretched hand, and said he hoped he was not inconveniencing her by coming so unexpectedly.

"Of course not—we love to have people come, and stay."

She had the Ardens' easy warm plantation hospitality, reassuring to the most timid people. Before they had reached the door she had decided that Frank's guest, though quiet, had enough aplomb for any situation. In the hall, Frank paused to speak to the servants. When he came to sit by the fire, even in the mellow light she saw how tired he looked.

She accused him of wearing himself out, but he insisted he was perfectly well. "You'll see an improvement in both of us tomorrow." He glanced at Luke. When they were all three settled in the bright warm parlor, she had a chance to take a good look at her guest. In the firelight, the hard taut structure of his face seemed to be cast in bronze. His wide forehead and high cheekbones had vigor, not regularity. When he smiled, he showed white teeth, but his smile came seldom, and then, he seemed to be forcing himself. At first glance she had supposed his eyes were brown or black, but they were blue, a deep, hot blue, alert, watchful in their expression.

While the men drank hot toddies, and she sipped a little sherry, she asked Frank one or two questions about his case, and noticed Luke seemed interested. Her curiosity about him grew. He must be about Roy's age, not much more, but he seemed older, years older, and different. She couldn't group him with any of the people she knew, young or old. She had no fault to find with his manners; he had the cultivated voice, speech and ways of a person with a good education and good background. He was both responsive, and intelligent—Frank never took to fools. She could understand how he might enjoy Luke Lydell's company. She herself felt the attraction of a kind of ardent vitality. Now and then she caught an expression on his face she couldn't define. It might be suppressed anger, unhappiness or even violence.

Whatever it was, it was schooled and disciplined. He might be capable of violence, but he would control it, she felt, unless he chose to unleash it.

He moved to put down his glass, declining a second toddy. Lucie noticed his jacket, well-cut, and of excellent material, but too short in the sleeve, much too short, and too narrow for his wide shoulders. Who was he and what was he? Frank was perennially ready to help people who were down on their luck, but Luke Lydell, however strange his garb, struck Lucie as being able to take care of himself. Nobody could fake that much assurance. Then was he a gambler, soldier of fortune, hunter, explorer of Western trails? Or a stormy adventurer? Frank had great tolerance, and a taste for the picaresque. He might take a liking to some reckless rover, yet she knew how careful he would be about the character, deeds, reputation, profession, and antecedents of anyone he brought home—most careful about any young man he would have not only under his own roof, but a young man he would present to Missy.

One of the servants came to the door to ask about the gentleman's baggage. Nobody could find it.

"I'm sorry I gave them the bother of looking for it," Luke said. "I forgot to say I didn't bring any with me, ma'am."

"Neither did I," Frank said. He saw Lucie staring at him. "Now sit still—" He poured more sherry in her glass. "Drink a little more and I'll tell you. There's nothing to worry about, not a thing. Everybody's safe and unhurt— The *Lambert* came by Live Indian Point and took us all on board—" Beginning with the end of the story, he told her what had happened to the *Great Mogul.*

Little Joe told the other servants that he had seen the doctor driving to Halcyon. Rosie told Missy, who planned to go to see him in the morning. Before she went to bed, she stayed out on the upstairs gallery a few minutes, noticing the varying degrees of darkness, blending and contrasting, and a glimpse of the lake's black satin, taking on a sheen from the bright stars. For a few minutes, there was absolute stillness, but neither the chill, windless quiet of the night or the clear sky gave any sense of peacefulness. The shadows masked dramas of the hunters and the

hunted. The silence reminded Missy that she had not heard the *Great Mogul* blowing.

The next morning, one of the upriver boats brought news of the *Mogul's* fate. Even then, nobody at Cibola knew that Frank Arden had been aboard. Lucie sent Missy a note, telling her Frank was at home again, which she already knew, and asking her to come over to Halcyon, which she was preparing to do. Her mind was full of what she had heard about the fire consuming the *Great Mogul.* When she reached Halcyon, Frank told her himself what had happened. She didn't meet the pilot he had brought with him to Halcyon. Mr. Lydell had gone to Natchez to buy clothes.

When Luke had waked up at Halcyon that morning, he had regained most of his usual good spirits. He had intended to go on to New Orleans, to find another berth. Dr. Arden had talked him out of it, arguing he might as well see something of this part of the country while he had a chance. "Once you're on a steamboat again, you'll only pass by, you won't have time to stop off and visit Halcyon," Frank had pointed out and Luke had accepted his invitation. He liked and admired Dr. Arden; then too, ever since he had first passed by this stretch of swamp, it had enticed him, aroused his curiosity to see it from the inside. He could take as much time as he chose.

Waking up, looking around the comfortable firelit room, he was glad he was here. He had expected to feel disoriented at first. Within a few minutes, he had felt that Halcyon was the logical, inevitable place for him to be, with Dr. Arden and his wife, the servants, the old hound, and the big, foolishly affectionate smoke-colored cat, curled in the most comfortable armchair. On the *Lambert,* he had written to his parents, and Walter Welch had promised to put the letter on the fastest packet upriver.

Luke had explained to his parents why he would not be at home for Christmas—he wanted to find a berth on a Mississippi packet, and the best way to find it was to go to New Orleans, though perhaps he would find it in Natchez. His parents would approve of his spending Christmas with the Ardens. His very particular mother would much prefer to have him domiciled here than roving about in wicked New Orleans. He had promised to write again shortly, describing his visit.

At first, everyone would be curious, and would ask questions. After a good night's sleep, Luke was prepared to answer them, without showing emotion. A man choosing to pilot a steamboat had to make up his mind at the outset to run risks, to put up with bad luck. The blaze off of Live Indian Point had helped rather than hindered his career, he knew, and would shed luster on him. Any captain would be glad to sign him on. Luke had the arrogance of his kind, taking obedience, deference, and flattery as a matter of course, but impersonally—due to his profession, not to him. Praise had no meaning unless it came from rivermen he considered his equals or superiors.

Walter Welch had said to the pilots on the *Lambert*, "My partner is a lightning pilot." Ever since he could remember, Luke had looked forward to the moment when someone of Mr. Welch's stature among rivermen would give him the title of "lightning pilot." The tribute had come years before he had expected it, and in an unwelcome manner. He had heard the longed-for words without any sense of triumph. He had not thought about what he had gained, but what he had lost. No one had died in the fire. Another steamboat, as big or bigger than the *Great Mogul*, would be built. In the meantime, there were plenty of fine packets on the river, yet Luke knew he would never again recapture the same sort of elation he had felt when he had first put his hands on the *Mogul's* inlaid wheel and had felt her swinging into the channel on her way down to New Orleans.

Chapter Nine

The *Great Mogul* had only been metal, paint, wood, and gilt, he told himself, yet it had been more than that to him. He was philosophic, but there would be times when the ghost would haunt him. Silences would give him back echoes of that deep, distinctive blast; a vision of a blackened derelict would lurk in

the shadows of some dense night; moonlight would show him a wraith vanishing around a bend.

Coming into Halcyon's gate after dusk, Luke had seen nothing of the plantation itself. In the morning, he had left for Natchez before sunup, taking the first boat, going to buy clothes. When he had come back, he had been in too much of a hurry to look around, since the Ardens had told him they were taking him to Cibola for a supper party, and he had to dress at once. It was to be an informal family gathering, with only a few guests, all intimate friends, but he took pains with the folds of his neckcloth and the points of his collar. Satisfied, he went into the parlor. Frank was sitting by the fire, waiting for his wife.

"Women's fashions are getting more and more complex, so it's no wonder they take longer and longer to put on. We might as well relax and have a drink."

Luke took the glass Frank handed to him. "I have nothing to do but enjoy myself, sir."

He was eager to explore the world behind the levee; the window gave him a glimpse of pale misty sky, a ribbon of lake, and an open space beyond the garden where sheep were cropping at faintly green grass. The view looked as peaceful as its name implied. Halcyon adjoined Tanglewild. He asked if the owners lived there.

"Nobody's lived in the house for years," Frank answered. "The place belongs to the late Mr. Severada's daughter, and she lives at Cibola."

There had been no time yet to ask many questions, or for the Ardens to give much information. So far, Luke hadn't found a link to bring him nearer to the girl he had once seen on the riverbank, or anything to establish her as a definite person. Maybe she was no longer near. Luke intended to ask Frank about her—a doctor would be sure to know everyone in the vicinity—everyone who had lived anywhere near. Now Luke was here himself, in this swamp country, inside the levee. He would describe her to Dr. Arden, and find out who she was, and if she still lived here. He was about to speak, but just then Lucie came in, ready to go.

She smiled at Luke. "I see your search for a wardrobe was successful. How did you find such good clothes in a few hours?"

"By act of piracy, ma'am. The tailor Dr. Arden recommended had just finished some for a customer of his, and I snatched the lot," Luke said, then explained more fully. He had not been quite so unscrupulous. The tailor had sent a note to his customer, asking if Luke might have the finished clothes. "The gentleman in question—a Mr. Metcalfe—very kindly told me to take them, as he had more, and I didn't."

"I know him," Frank said. "Of course he was glad to let you have what you needed. Nothing you could borrow on the *Lambert* or around here will fit you."

Luckily, a cousin of Frank's had left shoes and riding boots at Halcyon, and Luke was able to wear them until the ones he had ordered could be made and sent. Frank thought how quickly ordinary practical details began their work of reweaving the texture of normal existence. Night before last he and the others had waited in an agony of fear and tension, hoping, praying that Luke and Walter Welch would escape from the burning *Mogul* and swim to shore. Now he could think about what Luke had to wear, and rejoice because his cousin's boots and shoes had been left here, and would fit.

Both Frank and Luke had recovered somewhat from their experience, Lucie saw. She could guess something of Luke's feeling about the *Great Mogul*, and sympathized with him. Her own reaction was one of horror at the danger everyone on board had run. A sense of shock still made her feel unlike herself. This morning, when Frank had told his story to Missy, Lucie had seen her own emotions reflected in the child's pallor and stunned silence. Missy had gone to Frank and put her arms around his neck, and had not been able to utter a word.

Even without her overpowering gratitude to Luke for having the judgment to make the right choice in a crisis, Lucie decided she would have liked him anyway. He was the most self-reliant young man she had ever met—the most self-reliant and self-sufficient person, young or old, for that matter, but she had noticed he was without personal conceit. Unless he answered a direct question, he had little to say about himself, though he was not aloof, and as his hostess, she was thankful for his ready interest and responsiveness. He was already proving to be an easy guest.

In the carriage, he was listening to everything she and Frank could tell him about life on the plantations around here, and the people he was going to meet. His vivid eyes, bright yet dark in the intensity of their blue, were taking note of everything he could see from the carriage window. He had of course heard of Cibola. Everybody on the Mississippi had heard of it. He asked if De Soto had ever been in this vicinity, on his way to the mythical cities of Cibola.

"That's the cherished legend in these parts," Frank answered. "Woe to you if you dispute it."

Luke laughed. "I'll swallow it gladly. The name suits the plantation. I remember the first time I passed this way, on the *Eclipse*. Mr. Meldun—I suppose you know him, sir?"

"I've known James Meldun for years," Frank acknowledged at the mention of the name of the senior pilot on the *Eclipse*.

"He told me 'Cibola's over yonder'—pointing to the west," Luke said. "So it sounds legendary too."

"It is, rather," Lucie said, thinking of all the stories connected with it, and wondering if Luke had heard them.

"The road keeps on going around the lake," Frank explained, "but the two houses aren't far apart. We're always going back and forth. In winter, when the roads turn into a bog of gumbo mud, you're lucky if you have neighbors anywhere close to you."

Once the three plantations on the lake had only been names to Luke. The names and places, hidden behind the levee, had tantalized his imagination, and were now taking on reality. On this colorless, sunless afternoon, the actuality of earth, sky and water had something of a mythical quality, a dreaming calm. So far, there had been no freeze. The woods had none of the bleak wintriness Luke had seen farther north, only a soft, moss-blurred drowsiness, dusky with shadow. The woven mat of a mock-orange hedge, spiraling through the fields, marked the boundary between Halcyon and Cibola. Ridged with cotton stalks and empty brown bolls, Cibola's ample acres rippled back to the swamp, and fanned out along the lake's wide outer arc.

Everything in the landscape was drawn in circles, semicircles and moony crescents; sky, water, fields, road and the scallopings of the swamp against the horizon. Luke saw how the fields, rich

as velvet, described a dark half-moon shape, curved to fit the lake's pale moon luster. Both lake and land, made by the river, kept the Mississippi's imprint. The plowed land ended at a high fence, covered with ivy. A little boy, on the lookout, swung the gate open. The carriage kept to the same road, but it wound through the edge of the gardens. Luke had glimpses of flagstone paths, bordered with clipped shrubbery, noticed the massed starry sheen of narcissus, and saw the fiery flicker of rose and rose-red flowers blooming everywhere.

"Camellia japonicas," Lucie told him.

Luke said he was used to seeing them in bouquets from hothouses. Not only the road but the lake had become part of the gardens. Instead of being a loop of river in a wild swamp, the lake seemed to have become part of Cibola's design. The characteristic knotty cypress trees growing in the water had been cleared away, and the water had become silver sleek, frilled by ornamental planting, crepe myrtles and oleanders waiting for summer, azaleas already putting out buds for spring, and camellias coming into their prime now. In vivid and varying shades of rose color, crimson, and scarlet they were glowing all along the lake. In the dim, fading winter afternoon, their extravagance of flowering had an exotic strangeness to Luke's eyes.

Frank pointed out the Folly. Silky red camellias made a garland around delicate columns and an airy lace of filigree. Luke said it looked like a valentine. There were two gates, one to go in, one to go out. The driveway wound to the house and away from it, leaving a circular grassy space between. Cornelius wheeled the carriage through an avenue of live oaks. The branches made a continuous arch overhead. Luke saw statues glinting between the trees. Instead of seeming stiff, stony and too artificial he thought the gods, goddesses, and nymphs had naturalness and grace against the leaves and branches, as they appeared and disappeared in the twilight.

The road turned and the house came in sight. The columns had a nacreous sheen, the windows glittered and danced with lights and fires burning indoors. When the carriage drew up at the door, Isaiah didn't wait at his usual post. The destruction of the *Great Mogul*, with the doctor on board, had caused tremendous excitement at Cibola. Isaiah showed it by forgetting his

usual stately calm and sallying out to open the carriage door himself. He shook hands with Frank, shook hands with Luke, awed to find himself face to face with a pilot from the *Great Mogul*, and thanked the Lord they were all safe.

He swept the guests into the house, telling them how his sister Dora had sent Little Joe to the landing, and what she had said about the *Mogul*.

"I'm glad I didn't realize the *Mogul* was overdue," Lucie answered, "or that Doctor was on board."

Isaiah entered into her feelings completely, saying he reckoned hearing about it afterward when she knew everybody was safe was just about as much as she or anybody could stand.

In the hall, as soon as the door was opened, a group of people surged forward. In the first confusion of introductions, handshakings, and exclamations, Luke made no attempt to sort anyone out. He was led into a parlor; the room was warm, vivid with the rose-ruby color of the draperies and upholstery, bright with candles, filled with the swirling, dizzying glow from the leaping fire. Voices hummed in chorus, long mirrors, quavering with the brilliance of the flames, doubled the number of people. After a while, the flurry subsided, and when everybody sat down, Luke could take soundings. He was used to meeting all kinds of people, in all kinds of places and circumstances. While he answered what was said to him, he soon had everyone labeled from the information the Ardens had given him.

Mrs. Baring, though too plump, had a wax-doll prettiness, without much expression in her face. Her sister was Miss Snowe, and both ladies were fashionable and bejeweled. Luke was glad he had managed to appropriate suitable clothes. Everyone here, he noticed, was meticulously well-dressed, and except for Dr. Baring, who had a wide, ruddy, heavy-jowled face and a paunch, the people were as decorative as their clothes and surroundings. At first glance, Luke had picked out Philip Baring as the master of Cibola, but at once found out that the fair-haired young man was Roy Severada. The third young man, brown-haired, sturdy, quieter than the other two, was Bill Markham, from a plantation up the river. He was staying at Cibola for a few days.

"My sister isn't down yet," Roy said, "she'll be along." The only young girl present was very pretty, Luke thought, and

beautifully dressed. She lived near Natchez, and had come up on the afternoon boat. "Nobody talked of anything but the *Mogul*. To think I'm actually meeting the famous pilot!" She gazed up at Luke out of enormous brown eyes.

Luke began to answer her, but at that moment he caught some pervasive perfume, heard the whisper of silk before he turned around and saw her. There she was. Roy was introducing him to her. Memory, imagination might play tricks on other people. Luke had trained his memory not to deceive him, to record only actualities. This was the same girl he had seen on the riverbank, yet not the same. This was Ana Miranda Severada. Time had passed, and she had changed. He would have to give up trying to find the girl she had been last summer, just as every time he went up or down the river he had to adjust to change, and make allowances for the unexpected.

He drew out a chair for her; she sat down, and so did he, near her.

"I went over to Halcyon this morning," she said, "Uncle Frank told me about his experiences, and yours—" She paused, thinking no one could tell about his experiences, he alone knew what it had been to live through them. The whole story of the *Great Mogul* harrowed her, and she veered away from it. "We're glad you decided to pay us a visit—I say 'us' because we're in and out of each other's houses all the time, so you'll have to include Cibola with Halcyon."

Luke thanked her, and said he was glad he was staying and grateful to Dr. Arden for inviting him. In his first glimpse of her, Luke had noticed her unself-consciousness. That at least had not changed. In her own house, she was showing all the smooth assurance of an experienced hostess. Evidently she had no intention of bombarding him with questions, sympathy, or flattery. It was a relief, yet Luke found himself unaccountably disappointed because she seemed to say she had already heard the story and was satisfied to hear no more of it. He didn't guess she was avoiding the subject because she was still shaken by the danger to Frank Arden, and understood it was too soon for Luke to want to talk of it. Her composed manner gave him no clue.

She mentioned parties in the offing, and hoped he liked to

dance. He assured her he did, very much. Her perfume came from the pearly petaled gardenias starred in her smoothly coiled hair. Her voice had a velvety languor, and she didn't look as if she ever did anything more strenuous than wave a fan back and forth, or stroll a little on a garden path, perhaps as far as the charming absurdity of the Folly. He wondered if Philip Baring strolled with her. Luke noticed the tip of a gray silk slipper, matching her pale dove-gray silk dress; the silvery sheen along the outspread folds of her skirts reminded him of the silvery light glossing the lake this afternoon.

Her lake, most of it, since Tanglewild was hers, and half of Cibola. He told himself he mustn't let her catch him staring at her. She was not beautiful, or even pretty, by exact standards, yet he wanted to keep on looking at her. Smiling a little she was gently repeating, "Tea's ready." He came to himself, and followed in her wake as she led him to the dining room. Candles burned on the mantelpiece, under thin sparkling hurricane shades, burned on the table in tall silver candelabra. The large bowl in the center of the epergne held camellias, and the smaller bowls held smaller bouquets of the elaborately shaped flowers and buds; their flamboyant crimson gained intensity in contrast to the glitter of silver, and the emerald brocade curtains drawn across the windows.

Christmas colors, Luke thought, and the people around the table laughed and talked with holiday high spirits. He had been welcomed here, made much of, with cordial warmth. There was a pervasive excitement, perhaps because the story of the *Great Mogul,* and the danger Dr. Arden had escaped, touched them with a sense of disaster averted, spurring all of them to fling themselves into having a good time, making a festival. There was a savor of other festivities and pleasures to come, but Luke didn't feel he could sink into the atmosphere of Cibola—it lacked the comfortable, homelike ease he had immediately found at Halcyon.

At first he thought it was because the girl he had met here was different from the girl he had seen on the riverbank, and he needed time to adjust himself to this new picture of her. No, it wasn't that. Then what was it? Soon he began to be aware of subsurface complications. He wondered why Dr. Baring stayed

on in his stepchildren's house, and seemed satisfied to occupy a subordinate position. A man of his age ought to be head of his own house. His stepson sat at the foot of the table, in the master's place—obviously he considered himself and was considered to be chief and host at Cibola. Mrs. Baring sat at the head of the table, but Miss Snowe had been the one who had placed guests and family at the table, the one to give directions to the servants. Luke glanced at Missy; she was quiet, and had a lazy, dreamy look to her.

Then there was Philip. He was staying on as Roy's tutor, but as Dr. Baring's nephew he was also part of the family. When he and Luke had met, he had said that he didn't know enough about the river to ask sensible questions, and could only listen. He was sitting on the opposite side of the table from Missy, and not directly across from her. He kept up with the general conversation more than she did. When she did speak, Philip seemed to listen with particular attention, but maybe that was only good manners. As far as Luke could see, Missy showed no particular interest in Philip, but she might be concealing what interest she felt. Girls set store by good looks and Philip was remarkably handsome, Luke conceded, the type women would admire. Not that he could immediately decide who or what this girl would admire. She seemed to him as unpredictable as the Mississippi.

Sara Dent, sitting next to him, was easier to read. He could relax and enjoy himself in her company, flirting with her without involving her feelings or his own, or arousing the ire of Bill Markham. Luke summed him up as a "steady, sensible fella." He seemed to be waiting with good-natured patience for Sara to take him, as very likely she would. They would get along well together, Luke thought. She would lead her spouse by the nose, but was clever enough not to let him know it, or if he discovered it, she would make him like it. In five minutes, Luke had made his own discovery—Sara was by no means the feather-brained goose she pretended to be.

Listening, and watching Philip and Missy, Luke decided that there had been or was or would be something between them. Maybe they had quarreled. Or, more likely Philip might realize that he was in no position to marry, and intended to keep his

distance. Later, when the Ardens were getting ready to leave, and Luke was telling Missy good night, he said, "When I was learning the river, I passed by many a time—usually during the night, but I saw you once, when the *Eclipse* stopped at Tanglewild Landing. You suddenly appeared out of the wilderness—out of a grove of cottonwoods, and galloped to the edge of the bank."

"You have a right to boast of your memory," she smiled.

"It was a day last summer, before noon. On the left, going upstream, there's Tanglewild Reach, then a cypress snag, then the landing, then you—"

"What comes after me?"

She laughed when Luke said a dead tree struck by lightning on Halcyon Point. "I remember now when it was—and where I was," she said. "When we ride over to Tanglewild I'll show you. From the boat, those cottonwoods look like part of the swamp."

"I didn't expect to find you on a plantation, or in a house. I thought you must live somewhere out in the woods."

"I do—Halcyon, Tanglewild, and Cibola are chopped out of the swamp, and if we didn't keep chopping all the time the swamp would take us over again in a hurry. Right behind our fields the real wilderness begins, and goes on for miles and miles. Don't wander into it alone, it's so dense and trackless you could lose your way and never get out. Or if you want to disappear, nobody could find you."

She belonged here, in this fine house, he thought, but she belonged where he had first seen her even more. She had not changed, he had not been wrong. He had seen her in one phase, now in another—varying aspects of the same person. She was an elusive, impermanent landmark, but she had an immutable permanence for him. The light made a haze around her hair, like sunshine. The warm perfume from her gardenias stole over him. They were hothouse flowers farther north, but down here in the deep South, they bloomed everywhere in early summer. She looked like sun and summer.

Upstairs, Missy and Sara were lingering by the fire, arguing about Luke. "I can't see him as extraordinarily heroic, Sara, just because he stayed at his post. Mr. Welch stayed too."

"He's a hero too, but I haven't met him to tell him so," Sara answered.

"Pilots don't desert. Nobody's ever heard of a pilot who did. Of course I'm grateful he had gumption enough to land the boat—" The very thought of the fire, with Uncle Frank and all those people aboard made her shudder.

Luke was a "lightning pilot," and Missy admired professional competence. He had much more than competence, he had flair —a flicker of genius perhaps at his work. It was unexpected for him to suddenly appear at Halcyon, but there was nothing mysterious about him. He was clearly defined against the background of his own career. Everybody had made a hero out of him, but Missy had to grant he took it coolly enough. Not because he was modest—pilots were all haughty. He was used to homage, aboard and ashore. She admitted he had good manners —pilots had worldly polish, and women made lions out of them. They became acceptable in parlors, but never became parlor lions—they roamed off. Even when they were briefly corralled, Missy had heard that they never wanted to talk or think about anything but their work and their rivers.

"He isn't at all handsome—"

"No-o, but I like lean, tall, brown men—all bone and sinew," Sara sighed.

Missy laughed. "You like all sizes and kinds."

Luke wouldn't soften with age, Missy could safely prophesy, he would harden. He would have a lined face when he grew old, his skin would be tough brown leather, pulled over the ridges of his cheekbones. Time would accentuate planes and hollows, but for many a year, even in old age, his eyes would keep their color, their deep, dense, Gulf Stream blue.

"River pilots are all more or less alike in some ways," she said, "but they aren't like the rest of us. The life they live is too different from ours."

Luke was neither mysterious nor unique, but he belonged to a peculiar breed. He and the rest of them must be born different from everybody else, or they wouldn't turn into river pilots. Missy thought of how exact his memory was about that once-seen glimpse of her, but he thought of her, remembered her as part of the river bank, not as useful, lasting or important as the cypress snag or the dead tree on the point.

Chapter Ten

After her father's death, Missy had asked Frank to let her run Tanglewild. He had agreed to let her try. A good many people wondered why he had handed over the reins to a little girl not fifteen years old. They had predicted the arrangement would never last. Overseers were notoriously touchy, and Jack Bolton would get riled if he had to take orders from a chit. They said it was a pity to risk losing such a good overseer. Ernest Severada had understood how to pick them, and Mr. 'Bijah Sims on Cibola, and Jack Bolton on Tanglewild seemed to be permanent fixtures.

To succeed as a planter, the first step in management was to find and keep good overseers. Ernest had taken care to teach his children how to get on with them. Missy had learned the knack from her father, and instead of resenting her at Tanglewild, Jack Bolton was proud of her. "I knowed her 'fore she was big as a cricket—I knowed she could take a holt—she's the spit of her pa," he was fond of boasting. Since Tanglewild's crops had proved her ability, people agreed she wasn't Ernest Severada's daughter for nothing. But Jack Bolton, as she never forgot, had showed his faith in her from the first.

He was a little, brisk bow-legged man, with a thick carrot-colored mustache, flaring ears, and twinkling eyes, but his appearance was deceptive. He always took a pessimistic view. Mr. 'Bijah, on Cibola, was lank, limp, weedy, with a permanently mournful expression, and was always cheerful. The contrast between the two had always amused Missy. She and Frank had agreed that there ought to be some way to switch either their looks or their dispositions to make them match up better.

No one had lived in the house at Tanglewild since Agnes had moved herself and her father to Cibola years ago. Hettie, one of Aunt Dora's flock of daughters, stayed there as caretaker, and kept the rooms aired, cleaned, and polished. Since Missy had

come back from boarding school, she went to Tanglewild often. When the figs ripened, she helped with the preserving. The big iron kettles were set outdoors over charcoal fires. All day the preserves simmered until the figs became a clear, translucent deep amber in their thick syrup.

In the late summer when the children gathered the wild plums, Missy sometimes went along with them. When the plums were washed, they were mashed into a pulp, tied in cheesecloth, and left to hang over big crocks until all the juice had dripped out. There is a particular knack required in making wild-plum jelly, because of the plums' distinctive tartness. If the boiling juice is not cooked long enough, it turns into a sour ferment; if it is overcooked, it will soon go to sugar. By trial and error, Missy had learned the art of taking her jelly off of the fire at the exact instant it was ready to "jell." This year, Missy could take pride in rows of wild plum jelly, perfect in consistency, color, and flavor.

This fall, she had "lent a hand" to help with the tedious work of "furnishing" the Negroes on the place with their winter clothes. What she enjoyed was going to the dairy, wearing a big apron and taking a big spoon to crinkle up the thick layer of yellow cream and skim it neatly off the milk. She liked to pick up a basket and fill it with new-laid eggs; at pig-killing time this year she had helped with the sausage making, and had learned to like that task, but her great pride was her cornfield in the Hollow.

Tanglewild, on the inner curve of the lake, between the lake and the river, was not only smaller than Cibola, but part of its acreage took in low-lying land which had once been part of the lake. To the left of the road leading to Cibola, there was a spongy patch overgrown with trees and briers. It was beyond Tanglewild's actual limits, and Missy let it alone. But there was another area, which had been a curving arm of the lake, called the Hollow, and impinging on her fields. It had grown up into a heavy canebrake, a blot on Tanglewild, to her eyes.

As Jack Bolton said, it was a "disencouraging" place to plant. During high water, or even moderately rainy spells the Hollow filled, water welling invisible through the cane until it spilled out in dark ribbons and patches. Missy had always hated the sight of it, because of the story Aunt Dora had told her. Years

ago, one of the slaves had run away. He had hidden in the canebrake, or so it was thought. The search party had set the cane on fire to drive the man out. Either it had been an unusually dry season, or the fire had been only a smolder of smoke. After the smoke had died down, the searchers had gone in with their dogs. They had not found a trace of the man, either then or later, alive or dead. Missy hoped he had managed to get to the river, get on a raft and escape.

This year she had decided to cut the canebrake, and clear the Hollow. Mr. Jack had muttered that any cotton she planted would drown out in the first gully washer. Missy had suggested trying to grow corn, it didn't drown out as easily as cotton. Jack Bolton had been gloomy. "Mr. Ernest wasn't likely to let any good land go to waste—he tried corn. The water riz clean over his crop. I reckon you better leave it lay." But she had persisted, and he had at last conceded she might make a "begincement," though what she needed to pull her corn through was a "dry drought," which he doubted she would get.

The summer had given her the needed "dry drought." The corn in the Hollow had waved shining green, had yielded plump full ears when all the other corn had burned up. Mr. Jack had warned her not to expect her luck to hold next summer.

When Luke said he would like to ride over Tanglewild with her, she suggested they could all go, get a Christmas tree in the woods, and spend the day, eating dinner at the house. They were not able to carry out their plan as soon as they had formed it, the time was filled with other expeditions and engagements. Roy took Luke off on a hunt, camping out in the swamp. The day after the men came back, the group of young people started for a party on Catalpa plantation, back on Bayou Tensas, with Lucie as chaperone, as they had to stay overnight. Frank was too busy to go. Juliette, Agnes, and Arnold Baring had no desire to plunge through miles of woods for a gathering at a primitive house.

The plantation on Bayou Tensas had been cleared recently, the house had been built only three years ago. It was a pioneering venture; the Camerons had moved there, taking their chances with floods, isolation, and fevers. So far they had been lucky enough to have three dry years in succession. If their luck held, they intended to build a better house. At present they were

living in what was a large log cabin, set up on brick pillars to be out of the way of the overflow from the bayou. It was beyond its banks now, in one place forming a narrow stream across the road. A few rough logs, set wide apart, made a narrow bridge. Water was trickling over it when the mule-drawn carriage reached it.

The young men, on horseback, went first, to try its strength before they let the coachman take the carriage over.

Luke asked Lucie and the girls if crossing it made them nervous, telling them it was sound enough, though rudimentary. They told him they were not afraid of it, though Missy added, "The water's too high for this time of year." Luke said there was plenty of chance for it to fall before the plowing season.

Missy had never visited Catalpa plantation except in summer. On a winter afternoon, with a fine rain falling it had a different aspect. The fields were empty stretches of black ooze, striped with blacker water. In a flood, anyone living here would have to get out early, or stay until Tensas and all the other bayous retreated, unless the packet came by. There was one, plying the bayou, wandering through some of the other bayous, but it came only intermittently. In dry weather, it couldn't come at all, since it couldn't get through the shrunken waterways. In a big high water, if all the roads were cut off, the river-front plantations were just as isolated by land, but the packets came and went two or three times a week, sometimes several came in one day, going upstream or down.

The Camerons welcomed their guests with country hospitality, and the joy of the lonely at seeing new faces. Everybody laughed and talked; Luke felt as if he had known the whole family for years. The supper was sturdy and bountiful, grits, a great pot of squirrel stew, pigeon pie, haunches of venison, wild ducks stuffed with corn meal and pecan dressing. Luke delighted his hostess by saying he would like to add it to every steamboat's menu. There was hot rum punch and whiskey for the men, and cherry bounce for the women, as the hostess didn't approve of anything stronger for respectable females.

Luke tasted a little of Missy's cherry bounce, and whispered nobody could find anything stronger—it would flatten a roustabout. He was relishing being out here in the swamp with her. When he had first seen her, he had imagined her living in a

house like this, if she lived in a house at all. This one had only a few large plain rooms, with rough unplastered walls. There were bearskins on the floor in front of the log-burning fireplaces; antlers, deer hides, and wolf hides took the place of pictures and mirrors. The fundamental pieces of furniture consisted of a big table made of boards, a sofa constructed from packing cases, and a few chairs, supplemented with barrels.

The girls and their mother had made cushions for the chairs and the improvised sofa. The rooms were cheerful with firelight, decorated with sprays of berries from the woods, bright leaves, and vines twined here and there. Roughly hewn shelves held rows of books, and one or two bits of fine china and silver. The Camerons were waiting until their new house was built before they moved in their best possessions. Missy had thoughtfully brought two sacks of oranges with her, hard to get out here, and an armload of magazines filled with tinted fashion plates. Lucie had brought a work box for her hostess, fitted out with varied weights and colors of threads, a supply of needles and pins, scissors, thimbles, skeins of wool, and crochet patterns. Sara had come with gifts too, rolls of ribbon, hairpins, and hand mirrors for the girls, trifles even their deft fingers could not fabricate for themselves.

The few families scattered through this back-country swamp hadn't let bad weather or "gumbo" mud keep them from the party. Riding horses or mules, or piled in mule-drawn wagons they came. Some of the hands came to the house to play their banjos; one elderly Negro brought an old fiddle. Plied with enough whiskey to "warm his bones," he scraped and sawed with a will, evoking lively tunes. Everybody danced, young and old.

Missy was thoroughly enjoying herself. She invited all the Camerons, and all their guests to the Twelfth-night ball to be given at Cibola. Luke had promised to stay on for it. Though almost as soon as they reached the plantation, she told herself she didn't care if he stayed or caught the next steamboat. He was just what she had expected, interested in boats and rivers, nothing else. At dusk, when the youngest Cameron boy rushed in to announce that the packet, due day before yesterday, was now in sight, all the men dashed to the landing to meet it, all except Philip.

He stayed with the women, drawing sketches of Mrs. Cameron and her daughters, while Lucie and Missy helped with the supper. His quick portraits succeeded in catching likenesses, Missy saw, though a little flattered, which was only tactful. The girls and their mother were enchanted with the sketches, and with the artist. Philip had exerted himself to charm, Missy thought, and had succeeded. The men straggled back. Luke came in last; he had stayed on the packet until the *Cherokee* left the landing and nosed on through the windings of Bayou Tensas at a snail's pace.

When Luke was at last in the house again, he talked with unflagging zest about bayou packets, and bayous, drawing the other men—even Roy, though not Philip—into the conversation, which promised to last for a long time, since there was an inexhaustible supply of streams and bayous purling through the swamp. Missy heard echoes from the talk, as the men discussed Tensas, Roundaway, Bayou Big A Plenty, Bayou Big Heap A Plenty, Brushy Bayou, with their whims, their vagaries in high water and low, besides their tributaries, and other rivers they met and tangled with.

Luke showed Missy the sketch he had made, not of the packet he had just seen and examined, but one a little bigger, he explained, though with a shallower draught, so it would be able to make the run in any stage of low water. She glanced at it, not stopping in her task of arranging a centerpiece of the oranges and apples she had brought to Catalpa. "Where did you see a boat like that?" she asked, curious in spite of herself.

"In my mind's eyes."

He watched her intently, giving her a strange feeling that the moment had great importance to him, as if he was asking her a question, and demanding an answer. Oh, no! He wasn't thinking of anything but his plagued waterways! Her hands shook as she turned aside to finish her centerpiece. While Philip had taken pains to make himself amusing and agreeable by drawing pictures of people, Luke had been drawing designs of imaginary packets. As Luke stood there close to her, folding the sketch in his big hand, pocketing it as if it were something precious, but still looking at her, she saw her own face, tiny, but clearly reflected in the pupils of his eyes. One of the oranges rolled off the centerpiece, off the table, bounding on the floor. He picked it up, gave it back to her, his hand lingering over hers.

Against her will, her heart began to beat faster. His touch sent quivers of fire through her veins. Did he think he could fling her a casual crumb of attention? Let her wait, then set her atwitter? Angry with him, furious with herself, she retaliated by avoiding him during the dancing. They met in the square dances, the reels, then she whirled away. When he asked her to be his partner, she was engaged, and had nothing to spare to him. At last he cornered her.

"I've been dutiful, I've managed to avoid squashing bundles of blankets with babies inside, and I've been bouncing around with a lively old party of the dimensions of a large feather bed. I've earned some reward—"

The dance just ahead was promised to two other people, she protested. Luke smiled, in high good humor. "But I've promised it to me." He seized her and sailed off with her.

Her queer unreasoning anger lingered after she was at home again. Soon he would be steaming off, out of her life. Let him go. What did he care for her? He took everything offered to him and went his way. He had river water in his veins instead of blood, cold, dark river water. Why should he have any power to awake fire in her? He was obsessed with only one strange, bleak passion. She was repeating this to herself the morning the little group set out to go on their "spend the day" at Tanglewild. Luke was to meet them at Halcyon's gate.

Philip maneuvered his horse to ride next to Missy, the only obvious effort he had made to be near her since he had promised Roy to let her alone. Taking the short cut to Halcyon, the riders streaked across the fields, going single file along the narrow path through the woods, then coming out on the wider road again close to the gate. Luke was waiting and, seeing them, he spurred up to join them. In the sunlight his face was a deep bronze, Missy noticed, and in spite of herself, her heart began to beat with an uneven rhythm.

"Why does that sort of man interest women?" Philip was saying to her, turning to get a good view of her face. "I suppose because he's out of reach—"

Missy tried to make her expression blank and non-committal.

"And just as well," Philip went on. "He'll always live his own life, and never take the time or trouble to understand them."

"Why should women yearn to be completely understood?"

She answered, thinking a certain amount of male obtuseness was one of the wiser provisions of nature, since women could veil their shortcomings at least through courtship, and if they were intelligent, through marriage. At the moment she was anxious to keep her own mental and emotional privacy safe from Philip's prying, though she could not resist asking, "But what makes you think Luke's out of some woman's reach?"

Maybe he would not be worth the having, she thought, but he could be brought to heel, in a limited sort of fashion. It might be interesting to see how far he could be tamed. Here he was, saying good morning, smiling at her, asking her if she had slept well, and if the ride back yesterday had tired her too much. He didn't seem to realize she had been cool to him. Now the dizzying tingle of her nerves at the sight of him was hardly cool.

Luke understood her well enough to know she had tried to be scornful. He had his own reasons for being interested in the bayou packet. It was too soon to explain to her why he had left her for so long to inspect the packet thoroughly, studying it with an eye to the future. He was pleased with his design, he thought it had possibilities, even probabilities, and he was delighted with her hoity-toity airs. He saw possibilities in her attitude. Of course she was a spoiled young woman, all too used to having men at her beck and call, but she had noticed his absence, his preoccupation with the packet, and her reaction had showed a spark of interest.

At Catalpa, he had seen still another aspect, and cherished the mental picture of her, standing by the table building her decorative pyramid of fruit. Her pose, her deep crimson dress, with a shawl splashed with vivid flowers thrown around her shoulders, and the little knife glinting in her hand, had reminded him that she was part Spanish. When she had turned to face him, she had looked as if she were quite capable of using the knife for other purposes than slicing oranges, and her gray eyes had been anything but dovelike. Perhaps it was the firelight shining in her eyes, or perhaps anger had given them something of a feline glow.

The early clouds were dissolving, the sun was coming out. There was no wind, not even a breeze. Near the upper end of the lake, the road branched. The left-hand fork led to Halcyon Landing, meandered on at the edge of the water, past the house on Tanglewild, and joined a crossroad to Tanglewild Landing

at the lower end of the lake. Neither Luke nor Philip had ever been this way before. "And Roy better not bring you here to do any hunting," Missy said.

Luke asked if there was a short-cut between Cibola and Tanglewild, instead of the road leading by Halcyon.

"If you turn to the river at the crossroad, you'll get to the landing, if you turn to the right, you can follow the road around the lower end of the lake to Cibola again, and get there much faster." She said she would have to stop at the house, and speak to Hettie about dinner. The others could go on, she would catch up with them.

Luke said he would stay with her. Philip offered to wait too, but Roy told him he was needed to spot a likely looking tree. It was early to cut it, but they could mark it. "If we aren't by the slough, Missy, we'll be outside the levee, maybe downstream from the landing, but you'll find us." He started off, the others followed, Philip with them.

Missy and Luke drew rein at the gate; he helped her from her horse, held the gate open for her. There was no carriage drive to the house. A brick walk through the small fenced-in garden led to it. Compared to Cibola, it was small and plain, but Luke said he liked the looks of it. Not a ripple marked the lake's smooth luster; the oaks at the gate cast unstirring circles of cobalt shadow. The little garden was in order, the house was in perfect repair, but nobody seemed to be moving in it or around it. It had an air of being remote from the rest of the world.

"We call Tanglewild the Island," Missy said.

"I can see why—the lake must curve around three fourths of it, and the levee's behind it."

"It's my island," she said.

Luke's impressions of her kept changing. She was not only the girl he had seen on the river bank last summer, or the one he had met in Cibola's parlor, or the one who had tried to evade him at Catalpa plantation. She was all of those and more. He heard the underlying emphasis in her lazy, velvety voice. Possessive she was.

It was warm in the sun, the air was full of perfume, a fragrance different from any other, and it was not from the white narcissus frilling the path. Luke asked what it was. "Sweet olive," she answered. Two thick tall bushes close to the steps were covered

with tiny waxy blossoms, showering down as Missy went by, catching in the folds of her veil. He asked her if it was ever real winter here.

"Sometimes we have hard freezes, then everything is hideous for a while, but soon all the buds are out again."

As she went up the steps ahead of him, Luke took in the details of her appearance. Her dark-gray riding habit, her hat, with her veil folded neatly around it, leaving no loose ends to flutter, were suitable for riding on muddy roads, and through close-growing trees. Her boots and gauntlets were sturdy and serviceable. The lack of any ornament, the severe plainness somehow made her round face and little turned-up nose look childishly feminine.

Missy unlocked the front door, and Hettie came, welcoming them into the house and giving them strong hot coffee. From her discussion with Hettie, Luke realized that Missy was efficient. In Cibola's brocade-hung parlor she looked like a fragile, pampered, idle creature. He had to admit she not only possessed her "Island" but seemed to know how to run it. The house had been built just about the time the steamboats had first come on the river, she told him. Most of the furniture had been made on the plantation, and some of it had been brought from the old house that had once been on Cibola.

"My father's family lived there in a much simpler, smaller house than this," she said, moving to the spinning wheel in the corner of the prim little parlor. "Women had to know how to spin in those days—before there were any steamboats."

Not so long ago, Luke thought, all of this country must have been the wild frontier where people had existed in complete isolation. "It was even more lonely than Catalpa," he said. "Too lonely for you."

"The Camerons are pioneers—out there on Tensas," she said. "They stand it—I could."

"They work too hard."

There had been servants in the house at Catalpa but they were lacking in experience. Mrs. Cameron and her daughters were teaching them, but in the meantime they did all the sewing and mending, most of the cooking, preserving, poultry-raising, and other tasks themselves. He watched Missy as she stood by the spinning wheel, the folds of her riding habit's skirt draped over

her arm. "You have enough to do in your own domain. I'm afraid those pretty girls on Catalpa are going to get old before their time."

He didn't want her to wear herself out with grueling work. Then he wondered if the Camerons, young or middle-aged, would have a chance to wear themselves out with work or be swept away by the mysterious maladies prevalent back yonder in the deep swamp, prevalent everywhere in the swamp. In the three years the Camerons had been at Catalpa, they had lost the youngest boy, and a sixteen-year-old daughter had died after a few days of illness. It was a risk to stay in the swamp too long without a change of climate, it was fever-haunted. Missy looked completely healthy, and she had a good doctor to watch over her, but Luke found himself worrying about her. He could understand why people were tempted to linger on here in this country, lured by the swamp's promise of magic luxuriance and sudden riches, lured by something else too, the sly stealing charm of the landscape, and the life, leading them to defy the secret dangers lurking in wait.

Luke said how much he liked the house. "It's a pity nobody lives here." In the kitchen, Hettie was picking mustard greens and singing a spiritual, patting her feet to mark the swing of the rhythm. He thought how glad he would be if he could come back here from time to time, if he could find Missy waiting to welcome him.

"I come here when I want to get away from people," she said.

"Do you often want to?"

"Since my father's death, things at home have changed."

Something in her low voice, in her face, showed Luke how much she had felt her father's loss, and still did feel it, though it was submerged below the surface of her life. Then too, there was something tense in that household, giving him a sense of hidden reefs somewhere ahead. He tried to trace the source of the unease. Missy had a guardian to watch over her, and a battery of lawyers to look after her interests, he knew. He could not see how there could be any possible threat to Missy at Cibola.

Perhaps she was lonely, even in the midst of her family, with that inner loneliness very different from physical isolation, and worse, he supposed, since it was not easy to escape. Obviously, she was devoted to her brother, but Roy had his own interests

and pleasure, and was often away from home. She seemed fond of her mother, with a protective kind of affection, but Luke could understand how Missy would have very little in common with her. Admitting how Missy might be lonely, that didn't explain his own awareness of subtle undercurrents. If he felt their existence, of course she must, and was bound to find it a nervous strain to live in an atmosphere veiling secret tensions.

He knew she did feel it, because she showed it. She was natural with Roy and her mother—it was easy to understand pretty much their emotional relationship to each other. But Luke could understand now why Missy seemed like a different person when she was in the family group—with her aunt, her stepfather, and Philip, she was on guard, wary. Why? Just what did she feel about those three?

Missy led Luke through the hall to the back gallery. To the right, a closed door led on to the gallery. Missy saw him glance at it, and smiled.

"Are you curious? Locked doors in uninhabited houses always look mysterious," she said. "You mustn't go away thinking we keep a gibbering relative in there." She went to it, took the key from the ledge, unlocked the door and flung it open.

Luke saw what the room held, not chests of jewels and pieces of eight, but treasure all the same, since cotton was treasure these days. Cotton covered the floor and was heaped four or five feet high. Missy explained it had been picked after the ginning season was over, and the gin had closed down. Next fall, it would be ginned and sold. In the meantime, it stayed clean and dry and safe stored in this room, though once it had not been safe. Once, she and Hettie's children had stolen in, jumped up and down in the soft fluff, seized handfuls of it, scattering it all over the gallery and the yard.

The cotton still offered temptation, Luke thought, not daring to look at her, knowing he wanted to take her in his arms, and draw her down into the yielding fleeciness, learn the warmth her mouth and body promised. He turned away. If she could guess!

If she had guessed, Missy would not have been as shocked as he supposed. Undefined yearnings for reckless revelry and wild abandonment, different from any sensations she had ever known before, stirred and shook her. She longed to sink down

deep in the cotton—with him. Her heart was pounding with zigzag rhythms, the bands of bright sunlight stealing in through the slats of the shuttered windows across the room spangled dizzily, making leaping patterns before her eyes. She snapped the door shut. Her fingers felt lax and weak, without their accustomed deftness, and she fumbled when she tried to turn the key.

"I'll do it," Luke offered, taking the key from her, noticing her touch was burning hot, as if she had a fever, or perhaps he thought so because of his own fever. He quickly locked the door, put the key back on the ledge, picked up the gauntlet she had dropped, and gave her his arm to go down the back steps.

A steamboat blew for Tanglewild Landing. The *Magnolia*, Luke said. Glancing at his face, Missy was sure he had cared and still cared intensely about the unlucky *Great Mogul*. Everybody had talked about the accident to him. He had answered them with what seemed to be cool detachment, but she had guessed his manner was a mask. However thankful he was that there had been no loss of life, he must have taken pride in the *Mogul*, and it had gone up in flames. All she had to do was to imagine Cibola burning to the ground to share what he must feel about his boat.

They walked around the house to the front gate, where the horses were tethered. Luke held out his hand, Missy put her foot in his palm, giving him a momentary glimpse of a well-cut riding boot before the skirts of her riding habit fell over it.

The pressure of her foot was almost too light to feel, and she was at once in the saddle. "Watch out," he warned himself, "or she'll have her foot on your neck." It was too late to be cautious, he might as well be reckless.

"The first time I saw you, your feet were bare."

"If any of your passengers noticed, I daresay I shocked them," she answered.

"Not that you gave a picayune."

"Why should I? And a seasoned pilot doesn't boggle at anything."

"How can you be sure I'm incapable of—boggling?"

She laughed. "If you ever do, let me know when and where and at what!"

As he told himself, Luke knew dozens of prettier girls, and

they made an effort to attract and interest him, or at least pretended to; this one didn't, except to offer him the hospitality she would have extended to any guest of the Ardens. As the Ardens' guest, he had to control his impulse to snatch her from her horse, hold her fast and kiss her mouth. Unless—unless what?

The road turned. To the right, between road and lake, was last summer's cornfield. Missy halted her mare Bessie, and Luke stopped his horse beside hers. The field, the whole scene was worth looking at. Tall cypresses hid the lake, making a background for the field, where the stalks and tatters of leaves glistened rusty gold in the full noonday light.

"My corn did well this year," she said, and again he noticed her possessiveness. She added, "I had luck—it was a dry summer."

She told him why she wanted to be rid of the canebrake.

"Nobody would come near it after sundown—the hands said it was haunted."

Luke said he doubted if there was a word of truth in the story of the runaway, said it because he understood why it oppressed, though even if true, and it might be, none of it was any fault of hers. He had never wanted to own land, houses, a business—anything.

"What made you want to be a pilot?" she asked. Adventure, high pay, prestige, power, independence, and the natural restlessness of the male, any and all of these reasons could account for it.

"The Ohio goes past my door, and flows into the Mississippi."

His answer made her realize that none of the other reasons had much importance to him, compared to the river itself. The Mississippi was the lure. And seeing her here, Luke understood why she was possessive. She might value her plantations and crops for the sake of their worth in cash, but she was less interested in money than in the land. She loved this wedge of earth, was possessed by it. No wonder, he thought, even he felt something of its spell. He told her he was sure that she had exorcised whatever ghosts might have been around here.

Waves of warmth came from the sun-drenched field. A cloud of insects hummed, frogs croaked. By the road tall weeds wore crowns of little purplish flowers, giving out a musty-sweet scent, mingled with the scent of leaf mold, of dry burnished stalks, of the heavy earth. There was something sensuous, sensual, about

all of this swamp landscape. Turning his head to watch Missy, Luke caught the look on her face he had seen before. Her lips were a little parted, as if she savored the air she breathed, the touch of the sun's Indian-summer fire, everything she saw, everything she felt—all that this particular moment held.

He was aware of the flexible balance of her body in the saddle, the full curves of her mouth, made for kissing. She had some power of lasting attraction for him, the kind of feeling that played the devil with a cool head. She looked as if she were capable of passion, but her peculiar enticement snared more than his senses—she had snared his imagination.

Missy saw and felt the ardor in his eyes, in his whole face. No, she decided, she was deceiving herself—what she saw was only the vitality of good health and sound nerves, not emotion. She said they had better push on, and turned her horse. Luke agreed. It was time to go. They rode along toward the lower end of the lake, where the trees suddenly thickened. The dank ground, the heavy shade gave a chill to the air.

Luke could see where the lake had once drained into the river by what had been a bayou. It had never been anything but a meager thread of a stream, of no length, and it must have dried up years ago. When these lake outlets dried and filled, they became sloughs. The levee had been built across it, breaking the link between lake and river. The slough was a shallow ditch, marked by a lingering thread of rain water. The clump of cottonwoods had been left standing here behind the levee. The roots would help to hold the soil. Luke saw why—the slough had silted up, and silt makes an unreliable foundation. The levee built over it was bound to be weaker here than elsewhere, no matter what was done to strengthen it.

"Do you know where you are?" Missy asked him.

He looked around. "The landing's across the road, in front of those trees. You came along and went to the river bank right through here—so I saw you with the cottonwoods behind you."

Here was the road, the path, the landing, the lacing of trees he had mistaken for part of the wilderness, and here was Missy herself. He was finding another dimension to the scene he had learned from the pilothouse of a steamboat. He was with her, in her world, different from the world he had known.

Chapter Eleven

Convention limited the articles men could offer young ladies as gifts. As Luke knew, Missy would be swamped with the inevitable books, bonbons, bouquets, and fans. Even if the rules of propriety would allow him to present her with cashmere shawls worth thousands, or jewels, she already had a surfeit. He found a velvet-bound book of songs for Sara; satin-covered, lace-trimmed boxes of crystallized violets, rose-petals, and French chocolates for the ladies at Cibola; a just-published treatise on rare plants used as drugs Frank had mentioned wanting to read and own; a black lace fan for Lucie; and swearing at its banality, one in white lace, inset with medallions painted on gauze for Missy. Very likely she would have preferred another mule for the plantation.

Everybody from Cibola, with the Markhams and Sara's family, was gathering at Halcyon for Christmas dinner. On Christmas Eve, Luke went to the quarters with the Ardens, helping them to distribute the presents on the hands' Christmas tree. Then they went on to Cibola, to watch the gift-giving over there, starting later than at Halcyon, since Missy had to go to Tanglewild first. She was coming back by skiff, crossing the lake, Luke found out, and he told the Ardens he would go to meet her.

Watching him stalk off, Lucie murmured to Frank, "One of the hands is rowing, and Little Joe's with her, so she doesn't need anyone else. Luke wants to go. Do you suppose it means anything?"

"I'd like him, or a good imitation of him for her," Frank answered. "Except it would be mighty inconvenient. He's always on the river. Where would she live?"

"It's too early to worry about that yet awhile," Lucie told him.

Frank agreed not to cross that bridge. "Let's be thankful the danger from Philip's over."

At the lake's edge, Luke watched the tiny dot of light flickering over the water. He could make out the shape of the skiff coming nearer. He raised his lantern, signaling. First Missy saw the moving yellow glow, and guessed who had come, even before she saw him, a long silhouette, then saw his face. She surprised him by calling out, "Christmas gif'," making Little Joe and the man rowing the boat laugh. Luke laughed too, taking pleasure in the sight of her, the sound of her voice, the touch of her hand as he helped her out of the skiff.

It was a cold night, clear, with no wind, no moon. The stars looked as crisply pointed and shiny as the gold, silver, and tinsel stars on the Christmas tree. The road curved, and ahead Luke saw the brightness framed within the feathery dark edges of the oaks, the night stretching wide all around. The bonfire in the quarters blazed up, painting the rows of whitewashed cabins, the little church with its pointed steeple, the Christmas tree, glittering green, gold, red, and silver, and the throng gathered around it.

Luke joined the little group in the background. Missy and Roy gave out the presents as the hands filed up to the tree. Arnold Baring went up to Missy, offering to help. She thanked him, but said that she and Roy always gave out the presents themselves. He turned away, still smiling, without seeming to feel that she had rebuffed him, though in a few minutes he said he would go on back to the house to be with the ladies.

Luke asked Frank, "Don't Miss Snowe and Mrs. Baring come?"

"Not Miss Agnes, I never remember her on hand. She's a house plant, and Missy's mother was glad to stop coming as soon as Missy was old enough to take her place."

"Which was as soon as she was out of her cradle," Lucie added.

Standing a little aside, near Missy, was a tall woman, her back straight, her head held high. The fire brightened the vivid colors in the tignon wrapped around her head, polished her skin to ebony, and brought out the planes of her face. The lines grooved in it gave an impression of wisdom gained. Everybody treated her with great respect. Luke realized who she was—Missy's Aunt Dora. Neither Dr. Baring nor Philip seemed to notice her, but the Ardens promptly went up to her, to wish her a Merry Christmas, and Luke went with them. She knew who he was,

shook hands with him, told him he was welcome, hoped he was pleasuring himself, invited him to come back more than just this once, and be here for many a Christmas giving. He thanked her, and said he would like nothing better—that he would come back. Her welcome was genuine, he felt, and knew her opinion of him would count with Missy; she had listened to the exchange of amenities, and turned to smile at him.

The overseer, Mr. 'Bijah, shambled over to greet the bystanders. Luke had already met him, and had talked to him on other occasions. Now his long, lantern-jawed face relaxed in a smile, as he watched Missy. "Missy's sho the spit of her pa—" Luke watched her too, swearing to himself, damning her plantations. They were only bulky obstacles, soggy wedges of dark earth. She had not changed since his first glimpse of her, she was revealing other phases of her nature to him. He wanted her as she was, as she would be, but he was wishing he could turn her into a barefoot Cinderella.

He had some money of his own, his family was prospering, and a pilot's pay was riches to average eyes. His career, the prestige he had won, his earnings, present and future, gave him enough glory to dazzle the girls he had met and satisfy parental requirements, until he had met Missy. A pilot, even a "lightning pilot," had no extra luster for her. On the contrary, his life and his work handicapped him with her. She was rooted in her own earth; he roved the river. What could he or any other man offer her to compare with her plantations?

Over at Tanglewild, Missy had said "Mine." Tonight, Luke saw that she belonged as much to the land and the people on it as the land and the people belonged to her—or more. Roy did his part with spirit. He was important here, and had the greatest importance in the estimation of his aunt and mother—of everyone in the house. The hands evidently admired him, and were devoted to him, knowing they were lucky in his good temper and lavish ways, but it was plain to Luke that Missy was the one they depended on most, and probably loved best. Here, as at Tanglewild, she was the senior pilot.

Philip spoke to him, and Luke turned to answer, seeing his face in a wave of light from the bonfire. It was a handsome face, easily expressing changes of mood, and shades of mood, quick to reflect the moods of the people around him. As Luke had

noticed, women found Philip's responsiveness particularly attractive, probably because they thought he indicated a more sensitive awareness of feminine tastes and feelings than the average stoical male ever gave them.

With a sudden jolt, Luke realized that Missy might see advantages in a penniless young man without any absorbing ambition to forge ahead in any work or profession of his own. Philip wouldn't tear her up by the roots to carry her off to his world. He seemed perfectly satisfied here. She could add him to her other possessions, and both of them could stay planted. Luke knew he would have to leave soon. It was dangerous, damned dangerous, to turn his back on Philip, leave him behind with Missy. Luke felt lightning streaks of jealousy scorching him.

No—he was not going to run away from this contest! He would hurl himself into it, strive, fight, dare to get her. Philip wasn't man enough for her, Philip was not going to have her! There she was, standing in the shadow of Cibola's ritual Christmas tree, shining with its transient glamour and glitter, flinging a gloom of shade on her, just as Cibola and Tanglewild shadowed her with a burden of work and responsibility. Roy would never shoulder all of it. He was even now a bird on the wing, planning to go to Europe and stay a year or more. Whether he went there or elsewhere, or stayed on, he could never completely take her place. She would not only pine if she left what she loved, she knew too much about the undermining evils of absentee ownership to be happy.

Yet Luke was swearing to himself that not Cibola, Tanglewild, or all the globe's mass was going to keep him from her. She didn't want the rest of the earth, she only wanted this bit of it. Then let her keep it. He would find a way for her to keep it. He would work out a way. No matter how much he was tempted he wouldn't say a word to her until he had worked it out, and had a plan to offer. Obstacles? Circumstances? He was sure he could cut through them. Just as the river changed its course, and found a new one, so could he.

Roy announced that every family in the quarters would get a whole barrel of molasses, for lagniappe, which wound up the gift-giving with a fine flourish. The servants stayed to sing, dance, celebrate, and go to church. The white people started back to the house. Luke picked up a lantern, gave Missy his arm

and whirled her off, striding briskly along the road with her at first, then letting the others go ahead. He held the lantern for her to see her way. Woven in with the shouts and laughter, the solemn, deep-toned spirituals began to echo from the church.

In front of him, in the lantern's limited glow, Luke saw his shadow and Missy's, marching steadily on, linked together.

"You must be tired," he said, "you've been on your feet for hours."

"I don't mind– Since I've grown up, it's the part of Christmas I love best."

"Thank you for letting me be on hand. I–loved it too."

She glanced up at him, then away. He waited for her to speak, but she didn't utter a word. Neither did he, afraid he might say too much. Not yet–not yet. Sure of himself as he was, how could he be sure of her? For the first time in his life, he was finding out what it meant to be caught in a turmoil of uncertainties, doubts, and fears, learning what it was to have his hopes centered on another person, dependent on another person's heart and will. But he would never give up hope of winning her.

The folds of her cloak brushed against him, the light touch of her hand was warm within his arm; a dark hood hid her hair and defined her half-averted face. In the lantern's glow, he saw the glitter of tears on her lashes. What was the cause of tears? He longed to put his arms around her and hold her close with a warm, protective tenderness. Whatever it was she wanted, or needed, he must be the one to give it to her. The lighted windows of the house glinted through the trees. Luke thought of the people there–mother, aunt, stepfather. None of them loved Missy enough, not even Roy.

"But I do," Luke thought and felt and knew.

The week after Christmas was filled with festivities. On New Year's Eve, Missy went with her family, Philip, and the Ardens to Natchez. Luke was already there, had been there overnight, on business, he said. He joined them when the steamboat brought them to the landing at Natchez Under the Hill. They went to Richmond for midday dinner, and from dusk until long after midnight, the young people set off for a round of parties, going from one big, festive, crowded, bedecked house to another,

both in and out of town, Ravenna, the Burn, Arlington, Melrose, Linden.

Near midnight, Luke made his way through the group around Missy and planted himself close to her, claiming her for the next dance. Roy joined them, to tell them they had much better stay here where they were until after twelve o'clock. He asked Luke if he had found a berth he wanted on one of the packets. Luke said he hadn't found anything yet, but had plans. He was not looking for a berth, he had enlarged his aims.

He turned to Missy, with that look of his, as if he were silently asking her an important question. Irritated with him for giving up more than twenty-four hours to business, which of course meant steamboats and the river, she said she would like to go back to the time of the flatboats.

Luke smiled at her. "You'd better not yearn for them. If you'd lived in those days, a river pirate with an earring in one ear and a long sharp knife between his teeth would have crept up on shore, snatched you up, and carried you off from Cibola and Tanglewild."

In spite of the people all around, and Roy standing right beside him, Luke kissed her. It might pass for a New Year's Eve party's convivial token kiss—maybe Roy thought so. Missy hoped he did, and tried to look as if it was lightly given and taken. She knew it was real, and substantial. Instead of being angry, as she knew she should be, instead of leaving him at once, she stood stock-still, unable to move, dazed, her heart pounding, her lips burning.

Philip, not far away, had seen. He came up to Luke, with an air of being ready to challenge him, but as Roy only laughed and told Missy it was a dangerous thing to plant herself squarely under the mistletoe, Philip could hardly give vent to his feelings.

"She's not under any mistletoe," he pointed out. "That branch over her head is holly."

Luke paid no attention to him, to anyone. For all he cared about Philip's righteous indignation, or other watching eyes, he might have been alone with her on an empty island in the middle of the river. Watching her face, he said, "There were advantages to more forthright times, weren't there? But river pirates aren't all extinct yet, remember." He took two glasses of

champagne from the tray a servant was passing to the guests and handed one to Missy.

Neither of them saw Roy lead Philip off, or saw Philip turn to look at them. In the midst of music, laughter, singing, and commotion, they were alone with each other. The clock began to strike twelve. The laughter faded out of Luke's eyes, his face turned grave. The two of them stood there looking at each other, forgetting to drink their champagne. They wished each other Happy New Year, then in a voice so low maybe she only imagined it, he said, "Happy New Year, darling."

The group went back to Halcyon and Cibola on New Year's Day, after church, with Sara going along to visit until after the Twelfth-night ball. The next afternoon, before she dressed for tea—the Ardens and Luke were coming—Missy took out her dance program for the approaching Twelfth-night ball. A fluffy pink silk tassel and a tiny pink pencil dangled from the little booklet. "*Carnet du Bal*" was written across the cover in curly, embossed gold letters, surrounded by little painted figures dancing. The pages inside were numbered for quadrilles, cotillions, polkas, mazurkas, and waltzes, lettered in gold, the pages circled with garlands and cupids. The numbered spaces were still blank. Already the ball was causing a stir of excitement, anticipations, hopes, and fears. For some the evening would be glittering and flowery, but not for everybody. Though Luke had not yet asked her for any dances, Missy wrote his name in as her supper partner. He was the Ardens' guest, she argued to herself, they would expect it for him. Hesitating, not able to think of a good excuse for giving it to him, she wrote his name again, for the most significant dance of the evening, the last waltz. *Luke* —penciled in lightly, yet the letters glared at her, proclaiming they could never be erased.

Rosie brought her back to the present by coming in to say it was high time Missy was getting ready for the company. Only the three from Halcyon had been invited, but Cousin Julia had descended from the afternoon boat. No one had expected her until the day of the ball, and her unheralded arrival had put Agnes in a bad humor. In her dressing room, Missy soaked in a big tin tub. It was painted yellow, with a design of fat pink roses sprawled all over it, and its high rounded back offered some protection against drafts. Bucket after bucket of water was

pumped out of the cistern, carried to the kitchen, heated in kettles, then lugged up the back steps by Little Joe and Gus, then poured in the tub. Rosie was very exacting about having enough water for Missy's bath, and having it hot enough. On cold days, it inevitably lost some of its heat in transit.

There was a little ledge at the back where the bather could sit and sponge. Missy always sat down in the bottom and, as she settled herself, the whole tub crackled wildly; if she used too much soap, she slithered around like a fish in the soft, slippery cistern water, and she had learned not to have the tub put too close to the fire—the tin became scorching. Today the lapping water felt delicious; she let its warm silkiness close over her whole body until she felt the warmth fade into chilliness. Rosie laced her into a new corset, "Positively guaranteed to impart an ethereal delicacy to the female form," slipped layers of petticoats over her head, and fastened them.

The top petticoat had a particular importance, and was elaborate with fine tucking, embroidered lace edged frills, and bands of beading, run through with pale satin ribbon. Unless women could afford to have their lingerie made by fashionable seamstresses, or better yet, import it from Paris, they spent hours doing the necessary handwork, and more hours with a bodkin, slipping the ribbons through the beading. All this was done so as to be able to display a glimpse of froufrou to interested and admiring males. There was an art in showing just enough to fascinate, and not too much, which was considered vulgar. With the swish of the petticoat an ankle was seen too, if it was well shaped enough to excite rapture and not criticism from eager observers. Women with thick ankles had to take refuge in coyness and modesty, poor things.

When Missy was ready to go downstairs, Sara turned from the mirror to approve of the black velvet dress, untrimmed except for a deep collar and undersleeves of Point de Venise, and to admire the effect of the new corset, which made Missy's waist fashionably small. She grumbled because she didn't think she could breathe or eat, she was laced in so tight.

"Men don't admire a girl who has a hearty appetite," Sara said. "Philip doesn't." Her small face turned solemn, "You don't care what he likes or doesn't like these days, do you?"

"Well, I don't cater to his whims," Missy answered. "It's a relief."

"You've managed to make a clean sweep of him," Sara said, "but in spite of what he promised Roy, I can tell he's just being held on leash."

Missy paid no attention to the warning, not at the time. She was sorry for Philip if he loved her, and was unhappy, but she hoped to change what feeling he had for her into friendship, and was sure of her own power to manage the situation. When she went downstairs, Philip was waiting for her in the hall, as he had waited for her that first evening she had met him, smiling at her as he had been smiling then.

"How charming you look," he said.

With his dark eyes and old ivory pallor and finely cut features, she thought now as she had thought then—he was the handsomest man she had ever seen, or was likely to see.

"You look like a good little girl this evening," he continued, "so I'm hoping you're going to prove you are by being good to me, and giving me all the dances you can spare on the night of January the sixth."

"Of course I will—two whole ones. I'll write your name down right off."

"Will you give me the honor of taking you in to supper on Twelfth-night?"

"I'm sorry—I'm already engaged for that," she answered.

If he escorted her in to supper, everybody would stare and gossip, and he had an acute awareness of social nuances, so he must realize that as well as she did. "We'll all be at the same table with our usual group. It won't matter about partners."

"Then I'll have to make out with a lower place at the feast. You told me once—that you liked to waltz with me. The last dance is sure to be a waltz. Give it to me, Miranda—please."

Was he willing to risk Roy's ire just for a dance? But it was more than a dance, and he seemed to be testing her, leading her to commit herself. Locally, the last waltz of an important evening was eventful. Asking for it, granting it, indicated a definite preference. Rivals struggled with one another to win it. Hopes, fears, jealousies, repinings, and exulting triumphs were invested in its every note. Luke had come here in their midst and had stolen Philip's thunder. She couldn't be sure whether Philip was

willing to endanger Roy's confidence for her sake, or to score a victory over the invader. He was jealous of Luke, and jealousy was urging him on.

"It's already promised," she lied without a quiver. "Would you like me to save the next to last for you?"

"There's a difference—one's best, the other's second best."

She thought, she hoped she heard the carriage coming to deliver her. Philip knew better than to insist, but she sensed what made him reckless—he was probing to find out what he meant to her, or what Luke meant to her, knowing she was trapped into committing herself by her choice. She saw the glint of sharpness in his narrowed eyes, searching her face. "May I ask who has been lucky enough to pre-empt the one I've set my heart on?" he asked.

His heart or his pride? Both were involved, she thought. It was an awkward question, since Luke had not said a word to her about the last waltz, or any other dance, but she managed to keep her face impassive, and to smile. "To quote Aunt Dora, laroes catch medloes."

"So—so you won't tell?"

"Wait, and time will—"

She felt a pang, sorry she had to refuse, sorry if he wanted something with all his heart and could never have it. In spite of all the opposition, in the long run, she saw, it would be more convenient for her to be in love with Philip than to be in love with Luke, but whatever happened in the future, it was too late for her to love Philip.

"There'll be other balls and parties, with plenty of waltzes." She tried to soothe him, though she was beginning to be impatient with his persistence. She had her own fears and jealousies and emotions warring within her.

"There won't ever be anything to equal the resounding éclat of this ball, and the final waltz will finish it off—crescendo!"

Something strange in his face—some subtle alteration of expression—gave her a sense of sadness and unease—of endings, partings, finalities, when the music would stop and the candles would gutter out.

Philip added, "Nymphs and shepherds, dance no more."

The words struck her with their mournful overtones, falling cadences, weighed with his melancholy, intensifying her own.

She saw his face. "That beautiful pale face will be my fate—" eyes and voice to haunt her, but he was never to be her fate. The meaning of the words was not for him. He had only stressed what she already knew—make her choice, and pay for it, or she would hear in the hollow echoes of a steamboat's blast, "No more, no more."

Chapter Twelve

The Ardens and Luke came, and everyone gathered into the front parlor. Cousin Julia, sunk in an armchair, was almost invisible, but she was waving her cane around like a specter, and her cracked voice, thin as it was, dominated the rest of the conversation, which was being carried on in a well-bred hum. The house was embowered in holly and mistletoe, bouquets of hothouse roses, and flowers from the garden. Branches of pine and baskets of pine cones, brought from the heights across the river, gave off the scent of the woods near Natchez, and chunks of cedar blazed on the fire. Turkeys, fed on persimmons to give sweet flavor to their meat, and hams from the smokehouse sent out whiffs of roasting and baking, drifting in with a tang of spices, an aroma of freshly ground coffee, the bouquet from the wines, mingling with pervasive hints of chocolate, vanilla and molasses, gave a whole blended atmosphere suggesting holiday festivities.

Arnold Baring was playing host at a side table, ladling out creamy gold puffs of eggnog from a huge silver bowl, filling twinkling crystal cups for Little Joe to put on the tray and pass around. Candlelight flattered the women, putting a gilt edge around Juliette's ringlets, smoothing out her double chins. In her soft blue dress, with her cheeks flushed to a becoming pink, she had recaptured some of the Christmas doll waxen prettiness of her girlhood. Luke, talking to Agnes, was thinking how handsome she must have been, and admitted she still was. She was not tall, but she held herself to make the most of her height. Her manners to her guests were good, but formal, and she fol-

lowed formal fashions in her way of dressing. The folds of her garnet silk skirts crackled with the stiff richness of the material. A pair of gold bracelets, set with garnets, drew attention to small-boned wrists, and small beautifully shaped hands in short white kid gloves. She was strictly conventional, he noticed, since she kept on her gloves in her own house, though the girls did not, and Lucie had taken off hers.

Luke had met Cousin Julia, and had made his escape from her, keeping behind her chair, but his strategy failed to save him. She was peering around, searching for him. Spying him, she screeched commands. He must come and talk to her! He took a chair, and when Missy came near, sprang up, offering it to her. Shriveled claws, loaded with rings to the joints, fastened on his sleeve. "I want this dashing pilot to stay right by me!"

Luke managed to push up a chair for Missy, and subsided into his own, laughing when the old witch shrilled, "A wild and wicked pilot!"

"In a few minutes, ma'am, you'll turn me into something like Mike Fink."

Everybody knew the stupendous stories of Fink the keelboatman. He had claimed to be half wildcat and half lightning; he had boasted he could hold down a buffalo with one hand, "An' tar' the critter to pieces" with his teeth; he had also been able to girdle a tree by grinning at it.

"I remember the keelboats!" Cousin Julia launched on freely, describing the seven deadly sins as practiced in Natchez Under the Hill during the time of keelboats and flatboats. "Monsters! Slashing each other to ribbons, whoring with vile painted trollops!"

Luke listened solemnly, his eyes glittering with laughter. Agnes, sitting on the other side of the old lady, shuddered.

Little Joe passed the tray again. Missy declined the eggnog, and so did Lucie. All the other ladies, Luke saw, helped themselves, and Miss Julia guzzled hers down at once. He wondered how much they had taken already. Mrs. Baring was beginning to look a little overblown, and Miss Snowe's eyes had begun to take on a fixed and glassy expression. Leering at him, Miss Julia shrilled that the world was still a Babylon, as full as ever of decked-out sluts, and bold Jezebels ready to prey on fine gentlemen. "Not that I ever had to worry about evil wenches steal-

ing men from me!" she crowed. "I was a beauty and a belle—the toast of the watering places!"

No wonder nobody could believe these triumphs, Missy thought, yet as she looked at Cousin Julia carefully, she could still see a ghostly travesty of that long-ago beauty sketched in the bones of the caving, crumpled face. She reminded Missy of a bird's fragile skeleton entangled in a frowsy nest of shawls, dangling jet fringes and rotting black lace. Turning to Luke, the old lady accused him of being a bold devil of a pilot—pilots swore and cursed enough to frighten the devil. Instead of defending himself, he egged her on. Pilots were notorious gamblers, she said, recklessly flinging away their pay at dice and games of chance.

As Missy had often heard, some pilots did gamble like fiends, but she also happened to know that Luke never played for stakes, or played cards at all, not because he was prudent, she thought, but because none of the forms of gambling interested him. Very likely the hazards of mere games seemed to him what they seemed to her—vicarious excitement—flimsy and unreal—too tame for him, compared to the absorbing gamble with the Mississippi River. Maybe he did have a pilot's violent tongue, and could blister the paint off the boat with his swearing, but neither she nor any other woman would ever have the chance to hear him at it. Lurid language was kept from feminine ears. She decided to herself that he wouldn't be apt to waste his fire, either.

As everybody knew, pilots and the former keelboaters were a race apart, and could not be compared. Whatever their morals, the pilots were never seen to linger in any of the tawdry dens of waterfront iniquity, or with obviously low company. She had often seen them getting off the boats at Natchez, and driving loftily past the shuttered houses of Silver Street to the top of the bluff. In any town, wherever they were, the pilots made straight for the finest hotels, the most luxurious surroundings, where the most fashionable people gathered. For all she knew, Luke might be entangled with wicked Circes, but they would have all the outer graces of worldly elegance. Pilots did their riotous living in style, with a grand flourish.

Eying Missy, Cousin Julia wagged a finger at her.

"Ana Miranda, isn't it time you were getting yourself mar-

ried? Here you are, nineteen, and letting the grass grow under your feet!"

Before she could answer, Agnes said, "All her friends are getting married off ahead of her. She seems to let her chances slip through her fingers."

Luke glanced from one to the other, and was about to speak when Missy laughed. "I guess I'm lazy—I can't bother about holding on to some slippery fish."

She was quite unperturbed by the remark, but she saw that the old lady, Agnes, and her mother too had been drinking more than enough eggnog, and were not quite themselves. Luke, aware of it also, quickly put in, "You use your energy sprinting from the importunate hordes pursuing you," adding for her only, "One will catch up with you."

Miss Julia gave her screeching cackle. "Well, Ag, you aren't trying to teach the gel to get herself a husband, are you? First Frank Arden got away, then you let your own sister filch Ernest from right under your nose! You fell between two stools, deah. Now it's too late for you."

Before Agnes could retaliate, Missy was on her feet, inviting Cousin Julia to come into the dining room. Luke helped her up from the armchair and led her off. Agnes, he saw, had retreated, and was rustling out of the room by another door. She could not hear what the old witch said to him in sibilant hissings. "They have their little game! Her stepfather and her aunt are trying to marry her off to his nephew."

After he had deposited Miss Julia at her place at the table, Luke made his way to Missy. "Was there ever a Mr. Julia?"

"So I'm told. Long, long ago. I've always thought she must have eaten him up soon after they were married, like a Mrs. Spider."

Luke could be amused at the little jabs exchanged, but Missy blamed herself for letting the two women get out of hand. She should have kept them in order, and could have, if she had not been too preoccupied with him. After the holidays, she decided she had better take a firmer control on the reins here in the house.

At the table, Roy was talking about the day's sport. The young men had gone hunting on Halcyon Point. Arnold Baring asked to go with them the next time they went, and Roy promised to take him along. Sara, sitting next to Luke, murmured

about her own squeamishness with firearms. "The sight of a gun scares me, but my father thinks I ought to be like Missy. She's a dead shot with a pistol."

"That's good," Luke said. "I hope she takes a pistol with her when she rides around by herself." It made him uneasy to think of her solitary rambles, though she had told him that she confined her excursions to Cibola and Tanglewild, where she knew every soul. Once in a while, she admitted, she had been as far as Halcyon, though she had promised her Uncle Frank she would never cut through the woods unless someone was with her. But Tanglewild and Cibola took in a large area, and included some lonely spots.

Frank was saying in an undertone to Missy, "I'm so glad Luke's enjoying himself with you all. After his experience, he needs to be frivolous—and young for a while."

She admitted he was adaptable. "On the surface, any way. Of course he can't really fit in with the rest of us. He's too—impermanent."

"Judging from the way he talks, he likes it so well down here, I think he wants to go back and forth on this lower stretch of the river, instead of making the longer run from St. Louis."

"Do you suppose he will?" She tried to keep the eagerness out of her voice. If only Luke would stay near— Involuntarily, she turned to look at him.

He was now talking to her mother, who was picking up the wineglass Little Joe had just refilled. How much did she drink in the course of the day? A milk punch, or two, or three, strictly for medicinal purposes, hot toddies to ward off a cold, or cure one, sherry before dinner, liqueurs afterward, thimble-sized glasses, but never a single glass full—several glasses, and during these holiday parties and gatherings she drank cordials through the evening, besides the eggnog, the wines, and the champagne she took. Missy resolved to try to do something about her mother's habits when the party-giving and party-going was over for the season. She would have to consult with Roy, and Uncle Frank. It would be no use to try to talk to her mother. She would never believe she had ever taken too much to drink at any time. Ladies never indulged in any form of strong spirits. The very idea!

Like Missy, Frank was wondering about Juliette's increasing

taste for alcohol, and wondering if it had escaped Baring's notice. He showed no signs of being aware of it, but then he would be careful not to draw attention to it when other people were present. Maybe Baring had cautioned his wife in private, and perhaps found himself helpless against her bland denials. Juliette, like so many passive people, had her own forms of evasions, and stubbornness. Frank suspected that her constant dainty sippings, adding up to sizable potations, and the resulting haziness, gave her a refuge against some deep-seated discontent. According to Lucie's theory, Juliette was disappointed in her second marriage, though she would never admit it, not even to herself.

In the dining room, the thick green folds drawn across the windows shut out the black, rainy night. Voices, laughter, and the fire's cheerful crackling shut out the sound of the rising wind. On the sideboard, big lozenge-shaped china compotes, made of green-banded golden lattice work, and supported on crouching golden angels kneeling on a gold and green base, were heaped with glossy oranges, apples, and dusky grapes. The table was set with emerald-banded china, painted with birds and fruits and flowers. There were hundreds of pieces, and never once was the design exactly repeated. Wine, pale amber, deep garnet, glinted in decanters, quivered in the gold-dusted ruby of Venetian glass. The candles burned lavishly in tall silver candelabra, and red flowers—this time heavy-headed roses—filled the branched glitter of the epergne.

Over the mantelpiece was a portrait of a man wearing the powdered hair, lace ruffles, and small clothes of the eighteenth century. Luke had noticed the painting the first time he had come in this room, and glanced up at it now. The narrow, wrinkled, greenish-olive face receded into shadow, but either the skill of the artist or some trick of the fire gave the black eyes a snapping life. The man seemed to be watching the people gathered at the table, and the jet bead eyes of the parrot perched on his shoulder had the same sharp aliveness and watchfulness. The bird's vivid feathers repeated the room's prevailing emerald, a hot, jungle green, a lush swamp green.

Luke drank nothing, or very little. It was a habit no pilot could afford. He knew he was lucky not to be tempted. Walter Welch, who admitted he liked the taste of whiskey too well, dared not swallow a drop of it. Luke looked across the table

at Arnold Baring. He was a large man, a little above medium height, and if he kept on gaining weight he would be as wide as he was tall. Already he had a developing paunchiness, and heavy jowls. His wide face loomed beyond the roses, its width making his features inconspicuous. At first sight, his ruddiness gave the impression of a life spent outdoors, but after Luke had seen him by daylight, he realized that Baring's florid color was not from sun, wind, and fresh air, but came from too many lavish feedings, and too much wine and whiskey—his face showed the effects in expanding, softening fleshy folds, his skin, even by candlelight, was taking on the purple-red glaze of high living.

Meeting him for the first time, Luke had the impression of Arnold Baring as a contented, normal, healthy sort of man, with the friendliness and simplicity of a good-natured hound. Lately, he had begun to speculate about him. From remarks Luke had overheard, he had been able to form some conclusions. Baring, though he was ostensibly here to build up a practice, was not striding ahead professionally, because he was lazy, and lacked interest in his patients. Even if he was lazy, unambitious, didn't he have to work for a living?

Miss Julia, primed with eggnog and malice, was not to be taken seriously, yet the old harpy had acumen, and might have been telling the truth, at least in part, since Luke could see why Baring might want his nephew to marry his stepdaughter. But why should Miss Agnes Snowe want the match for her niece? Not that wanting it would bring it about, unless Missy herself decided to marry Philip. Nobody could mold or maneuver, least of all her stepfather and her aunt. She had a will of her own, but even a hint that anyone might be trying to use her irritated Luke. He did not like to go away and leave her among these people. The Ardens were leaving in January, the lawyers were at a distance, he himself would be far away from her, at least for some time.

Sara was cooing in his ear, "Isn't this a beautiful room?"

"Very—the whole house is." In spite of the almost feverish brilliance of color in most of the rooms, Cibola made the steamboat style of magnificence second-rate, glitter and glass, to amaze naïve folks. This was for people with exacting and sophisticated tastes.

Roy rubbed his finger bowl until it hummed with a faint thin

singing. Sara didn't see what he was doing, but she heard the sound, and gave a little gasp. This time, as Luke saw, it was a genuine shiver. Even when she knew what it was, she murmured, "It's—eerie." Lowering her voice to keep from being heard by the others, she whispered, "There was a ghost in the old house—the one Mr. Ernest tore down—the ghost of the man who was murdered in it."

"But not in this house," Luke reassured her. "Any rule-abiding spirit would have to stick to its original haunting place."

"I guess so," she agreed, still serious. "But Aunt Dora has the notion it isn't always places—sometimes they haunt—particular people. And that's worse."

As she did not want him to laugh at her, he satisfied her by telling her she would never worry about them, but he didn't say they were nonexistent. He had heard the story that Sara had been referring to, and thought he knew what Aunt Dora meant. A thought brushed a chill across his mind for a moment, then was gone— What must it be if you had to live on in the shadow of a real specter—the one who comes back?

As the ladies were leaving the room, Luke caught Missy off from the others long enough to make his demands for the Twelfth-night ball. He wanted the last waltz—without fail, and the honor of escorting her in to supper, and anything else available. Since she had no intention of letting him guess how much she wanted to give him what he asked, she pretended to gasp at his boldness.

"You seem to expect to skim off the cream of that evening, don't you? Just like a high and mighty, kid-glove, diamond-stickpin pilot!"

"Don't you know we always want—and get—the best of everything?" And the best included women—one woman. After he had discovered this one, how could he ever be satisfied with any one less? Or any one else? He could not, would not.

"Say yes—" He held his breath until he had extracted a faint, reluctant, drawn out "Yes—"

"That was a little quavery—but it's a promise all the same," he said.

She admitted it was a promise, though she would never admit his name was already written down in those spaces. Let him think he had won after a hard battle!

"Good–that's settled, now I'll go on and tell you I'm honored, flattered, dazzled, and happy to accept any odd scraps you'll throw me."

Juliette drifted to her daughter, and drew Luke's attention to the portrait. "Our ancestor, no"–she frowned–"Miranda's, and Roy's–Don Miguel Severada, all this land was hish, from the Spanish Crown." Her speech was only slightly thickened. "He came here from Natchez–founder of the family–and family forshuns–"

Everyone looked up at Don Miguel, except Roy, who had turned to ask Isaiah about the wine he wanted brought.

"The artist knew his business," Philip said. "Don Miguel must have been quite a personage."

Luke noticed Missy's dimples. She was trying not to laugh. The Ardens made no comment, except to agree with Philip about the painter's talent.

"The portrait catches my eye every time I come in this room," Luke was able to say truthfully, looking not at it but at Missy.

Arnold Baring nodded. "A fine old gentleman–gentleman of the old school."

Miss Julia gave one of her harsh cries; it sounded as if the parrot on Don Miguel's shoulder might have suddenly jeered at them all.

When the men came back to the parlor, Miss Julia had gone upstairs. Lucie was sitting on the sofa with Juliette, who had retreated to a shadowed corner, where she now and then dozed off, giving Missy the opportunity to keep her favorite peach brandy away from her. As Luke came in the door, he saw Missy pour the contents of her mother's glass into a vase of flowers. Agnes was enthroned in the armchair Miss Julia had vacated. Roy glanced at the little group, and immediately offered to give them some music. With that as an excuse, he whisked the young people to the back parlor, where there was a piano, and inviting Sara to try out some duets with him, picked up the book of songs Luke had given her for Christmas.

"Here's one sad and sentimental enough for you. Luke certainly knew how to cater to your taste."

"I chose them carefully." Luke was lighting the candles. "With plenty of tra-las for her."

Philip obediently sat down to play the accompaniment. As Missy neither played nor sang, and preferred to listen to the tune, which had a lilt, and ignore the lyric, which in this particular duet made even less sense than usual, she wandered off and sat down by the fire. Luke soon followed her.

"When we were looking at your ancestor's portrait, your dimples gave you away," he accused her. "You were laughing to yourself and by yourself. That's not fair."

"Are you good at reading faces? What did you see in his?"

"He and his parrot look a little alike—the painter was sly about bringing it out."

The unknown artist had faithfully reproduced a surface respectability, then in the soulless, bright, ambiguous eyes had linked man and parrot, as if they were both denizens of the jungle.

She laughed. "You're very sly to side-step the trap. Strangers who don't know about him always fall in. So you must have heard tales."

"No, not a word, tell me about him."

"Oh, it's all very vague," she said. "But he must have been an old devil to get such a bad name. Somehow he did manage to get a land grant—nobody wanted this wilderness then—though he was a pirate, and what's worse, a slave-trader."

Natchez merchants had carried on a brisk trade with Jean Lafitte and men of his on Natchez Island, in the past. A touch of piracy was overlooked, but any connection with the slave trade was an ineradicable blot in the South. Miguel Severada, grown well to do, but not respectable, had built himself a house off of the Natchez Trace. According to the stories, he had put a lamp in his window, and when solitary travelers saw the light twinkling in the dark, they usually galloped to his house. He had entertained them with a good dinner, polite manners and conversation, given them a favorable impression, and plied them with fine wine.

It was a special wine, heavily drugged, and when the guest fell into a deep sleep, his host took his money and valuables. Though nothing was ever proved against Miguel, he managed his robberies so smoothly. One of the victims was said to have disappeared in the vicinity of the house.

"In those days justice was slow to catch up with anyone living in such an isolated place—it still is sometimes, but—Miguel must have been afraid. He decamped—he and his parrot—and came over here."

"Where he flourished as the wicked do," Luke finished for her, smiling at her.

"Your face didn't tell me you—dislike your stepfather."

"What makes you think that?"

"I have no business to say so," he answered. "I've flung all the rules of conventional good manners overboard, but"—he gave her a pilot's definite certainty—"it's true." He couldn't resist adding, "You don't object to Philip's being here, do you?"

"Why should I? His being here is—entirely different!"

Different, Luke thought, and from his point of view, much more dangerous.

"Do you think—the tutoring and traveling will work out?"

Luke had his own doubts, Missy saw, and she was annoyed with him for guessing the whole arrangement was flimsy.

"Of course it will. Philip has to take what opportunity comes his way. You could always do as you pleased." From the Ardens, Missy had heard that Luke's family were solidly rich and solidly respectable.

"Philip can do as he pleases," Luke said. "My father gave me an education, but I earn my own keep. Philip's well educated. Think of all the men without a picayune, with no educations, except what they can pick up for themselves—they get along—plenty of them get ahead. If Philip has the brains and talents you all give him credit for, he can too. This country right now is bursting with opportunities. I shed no tears over Philip's hard fate. He's here not because he has to stay, but because he wants to—"

For one thing, both Roy and Philip had mentioned the teaching engagement Philip had flung aside, on what to Luke seemed short notice. "If he stays here, Philip might choke on cream."

"Maybe you believe what people say," Missy answered him, "that Cibola brings bad luck!"

She found it hard to get to sleep that night. She left her bed, wrapped herself in her peignoir, pushed open the door, and stepped out onto the gallery. The rain had stopped, the wind

rose and died. The clouds broke, showing the Dog Star shining in the southern sky, so brilliant it sent a thin flickering thread of fire on the lake. There was some voodoo practice on Cibola, as on all of these plantations. No one seemed to know anything definite about it, but it had its power. Every now and then, as she knew, her Uncle Frank tried to treat cases where a person, apparently in perfect health, would take to his or her bed, and quickly or slowly die, for no known reason, except that he or she had been "conjured."

Missy often wondered why this dark, unknown force, made of nothing, could have such effect. Sometimes, late at night, she could hear the drums, so low she could hardly be sure, yet once she had caught the steady insistent rhythm, she couldn't escape the sound. After a while the beat gave her a gnawing restlessness. She thought she heard the drums now, then knew she had only imagined the thudding. When she went back to bed, she still heard the drums, demanding, threatening, promising, urging, "Come, come, come—" It was nothing outside, she realized, nothing she could escape, it was her own heart beating.

Chapter Thirteen

The next afternoon, Luke set out alone, on foot, to Cibola. He turned into the garden, following one of the flagstone walks. The wind had dropped, the steely gray sky had lightened to a silver shine, and the sun was struggling to come out. He wondered where Missy was. The weather was good enough to tempt her out of the house. He intended to find her, but first he wanted to talk to Silas. Luke had made acquaintance with Silas. First, he came across one of the under gardeners, raking leaves, who gave some hopeful though not very specific information—Silas was somewhere around, more likely to the back by now—no "fur piece."

Luke thanked the boy and went on. Not far from the house,

and to one side of it, was the maze. The walks spiraled secretively through high hedges of clipped box, inviting children to play endless games of hide and seek, or lovers to meet without being seen. The back gardens, enclosed in high fences, had a secluded charm. The cold had not hurt the camellias, they were blooming in all their flamboyance of color. Before he had wandered long, Luke heard Silas muttering to himself, and a turn in the path showed him the old man, grumbling because he had found a piece of fallen branch, overlooked by an underling. Luke caught up with him, and they exchanged good evenings, and inquiries about each other's health. Silas complained of the weather, the dampness had brought on the misery in his leg, and a freeze would swizzle the flowers before all the expected company came

Luke dismissed the idea of a freeze, and advised Silas to get out of the damp. Missy had told him to rest himself, Silas admitted, but "lessen he kept his own eyes on them young, fly, triflin' critters what calls theyselfs gahd'ners, this heah place would go back to swump." Even a medium-sized branch athwart a path aroused Silas's ire, but he was right. If the pruning, weeding, and hoeing was not kept up constantly, soon the heavy tide of wild growth would engulf the civilized pattern.

Luke asked Silas if he knew where to find a florist who would supply a bouquet of Cape jessamine flowers—he was careful not to call them gardenias—he hadn't been able to find them in Natchez the last time he had been there, but Missy had worn some. Where had they come from? Silas had nothing but scorn for Natchez florists. "Ah growed 'em." He waved his rake in the direction of his hothouse. He kept bushes in there through the winter, but never had more than a few flowers on them at a time. He was nursing four buds along now for Missy, because she had told him she had a mind to wear them on the night of the big party. He reckoned they would bloom in time for her to use them when all the folks came.

Since he could not hope to give her a bouquet of cotton blossoms in January, Luke was more than ever determined to send Missy a bouquet to match the flowers Silas was hoarding for her. He said he would have to go to Natchez and look again. After he had mumbled to himself, Silas came out with the name and

address of a cousin of his, a free man of color, who had a fine garden a little out from Natchez, and a hothouse. "Ah done heard tell he got a heap er them booshes, an' right sma't flowers on 'em all yeah 'roun'." He pointed his rake at a line of shrubbery. "Come spring, they busses out all over, same as the wile tresh in de woods. Doan know how come Missy wants to stick them mos' wile things in her haid when big company's comin', but she do."

Luke thanked him for his help, advised him to take care of himself, told him the garden would look fine for the party, and put two silver dollars in his hand. Delighted with the conversation and the two round dollars, Silas gave a rusty chuckle, and gestured with the rake in the direction of Aunt Dora's cabin. If Luke wanted a word with Missy, she had "lit out thattaway." Wheezing out another chuckle, he said, "This time nex' yeah, Ah'll grow you a heap of them mah'self, so's you won't have to traipse clar to Natchez to fotch a bokay for Missy."

The promise lingered in Luke's mind as he walked on in search of Missy. If her family didn't yet know how he felt about her, word had evidently gone around among the servants and had spread. Missy had told him something about the ways of communication. "We don't know much about them—unless they now and then let us in on a secret—but they know everything about us," she had said. Silas, Luke felt, was ready to accept him as part of Cibola! He was making headway! In a few days, his plan would be solid enough to tell her all about it. He went striding through the garden to the side gate.

The sun had come out, putting gloss and glisten on wet leaves, painting strips of blue sky and cloud in the puddles, making the whiteness of Aunt Dora's cabin shine against the big oak behind it. The door was shut, the windows tightly closed with thick wooden shutters. A ribbon of smoke unwound from the chimney, rising high before it drifted, promising firelit snugness indoors and fair weather outdoors. Luke crossed the road, and was about to knock, when Aunt Dora came out of it, her black cat at her heels.

Luke exchanged amenities with her, they agreed it was lucky the weather had turned off fine. He didn't have to ask about Missy. Aunt Dora told him she had gone to take some flowers to

the graveyard. He thanked her, then as he faced her, he decided to confide in her, ask her to put in a good word for him—if she would. After their conversation, she watched him as he went on down the road.

Aunt Dora and the cat were still outside when Silas came poking along. He accepted her invitation to come in and set a spell by the fire. She poured him some whiskey. Missy had brought her two bottles on New Year's Day. A little "hot cat" did old bones good in changeable damp weather. Silas displayed the dollars Luke had given him. He liked Mr. Luke just fine, but did he aim to take Missy off somewheres? Aunt Dora said that she had worried about that for a while, but now her mind told her not to fret over it any more. She had a feeling—Mr. Luke was going to fix everything up so Missy wouldn't have to go any place. She could stay right here.

Most of the families who lived and died in the swamp were buried in Natchez or Vicksburg, out of the way of high water. On Cibola, there was a low Indian mound, with the Severada graveyard on top of it, a logical place to inter their bones because of the elevation. Locally, people said that the Severadas, if they couldn't take Cibola with them, stayed with it, clinging to their land even after they were dead. Brick steps led up to the little cemetery, a rose-twined iron fence enclosed it. Weeping willows, magnolias, and cedars shaded it. Narcissus were blooming, white in the shadows, last night's rain had scattered most of the blossoms from the sweet olive trees, but the buds would soon open.

Marble urns and crosses glimmered, and Missy saw her own name cut in a headstone. If that other Ana Miranda had given up the rest of the world for Alex Severada, at least he had brought her to Cibola, not taken her away from it.

After she had put her camellias on her father's grave, Missy put a few on her grandmother's grave. She turned and saw someone standing at the gate. It was Luke—in the shade of the trees his face looked as dark as an Indian's. He said he hoped he had not startled her—did she want him to wait at the foot of the steps until she was ready to go?

"I'm ready now—"

He came through the gate to pick up the basket she had set

on the ground. A dagger of sunlight, knifing through the dark leaves, struck the crimson flowers she had left, making them burn with a shock of barbaric color. Luke gave Missy his arm to go down the steps. "Aunt Dora told me where you were, so I came to walk with you back to the house."

The road was muddy, giving him an excuse to keep her arm within his, to guide her, giving her an excuse not to move away. He asked her if she knew anything about the mound.

"Roy and I used to dig in it, looking for arrows. De Soto's historians wrote about these mounds, and the Indians they said they saw. They had buildings on top of the mounds, and a whole empire of villages, and fields full of maize and all kinds of crops."

The Spaniards have left descriptions of the painted caïques filled with Indian warriors, wearing bright ornaments and plumed headdresses, with the Emperor sitting under a canopy in his great war canoe, hedged in by the massed glittering spears of his most important chieftains.

A century and a half later, when the French came, they hadn't found a trace of those civilized Indians, the buildings, or the fine crops. They had neither seen nor heard of an Emperor or an empire. The French had concluded that the Spanish had made up their history, that it was all a legend, like El Dorado in the west, and the cities of Cibola.

"Maybe it did all exist," Luke said, "and was swept away—" Not by famine, not in this lush country, if the empire had been here, but by cholera or yellow jack, or some disastrous war. There was no memory passed down through the generations, not much left to give a link to that past, except the names the Indians had given the rivers—Ohio, Missouri, Ouachita, Atchafalaya, Homochitto, Tensas, Mississippi—Luke loved the sound of them.

"We like to think De Soto's bones are in this lake," Missy said. "Though that's only our pet myth."

"The lake would have been part of the river then, so you might as well cling to your myth. When my time comes, the Mississippi is welcome to mine."

"Don't say that! It's a—horrible idea!"

"All right, I won't. But it was the most suitable place for De Soto," Luke answered.

Missy was remembering his piratical kiss on New Year's Eve. Time was slipping away. Out here, with no one around, he made no attempt to kiss her. It was no use to think he would ever come to her room in secret, late at night. If he wanted her, he would come storming in the front door at high noon, making demands. She struggled in the turmoil of her own emotions and sensations, hurling her on, rushing her away from peace of mind, from safety—it was like leaving the calm of the lake for the turbulence and largeness of the river, yet the time before she had ever known Luke seemed to her remote, a finished era. She could never go back, only go on.

"Look—" She halted. Together, Missy and Luke stood still to watch the round red sun go down behind the trees. The plantation bell began to ring. When the echoes died, the last bit of sun had disappeared. The children were no longer shouting and playing in the quarters. Their mothers had called them in. There was no wash of firelight from open cabin doors, all doors and windows were shut. At the moment, not even a dog was barking. It was as if all the sounds of the day had ended, and the sounds of the night not yet begun. There was silence over all of the plantation. A waiting kind of quiet, she thought, glancing at Luke. From his expression, she could read his response to Cibola's spell.

The frail transparent web of swamp changed suddenly, drawing a curve of midnight shadow against the clear ruby light in the west. The richly gilded fields turned purple, purple dark. The swamp seemed to move forward, flinging its shade over Cibola, steeping the earth in quick-coming night. Just now, Luke thought, it would be easy to forget that the cabins, the house, and numbers of people were near. It was the moment when the myths became real. The innate loneliness and wildness of the landscape came stealing back. He could understand Missy's feeling for her own home. There was something about it that seized and held your imagination.

Cibola offered him too much scope for his own imaginings, he realized, knowing what was wrong with his nerves. He did not want to go away from Missy, even for a while, and he must go. Soon. He turned to her. "Did you intend to walk back this late by yourself?"

She was surprised at his question. "It's not late—" If she had been alone, she would not be tempted to loiter, and would have reached the house by dark—by now. "I always do—along here, on this stretch of road. Why not? It's no distance, and it's perfectly safe."

He remembered what she had said to him last night, about Cibola—people around here saying that Cibola brought bad luck! He was not superstitious. If he had believed a word of that nonsense, he would never let her stay here, even if he had to carry her off by main force. "Will you promise me something? Don't go far by yourself, and don't stay out late. It isn't safe. You might catch cold, or—get a fever."

That at least was a logical fear: miasmas, malaria swamp fever lurked.

"Fevers don't strike in winter," she answered. "But all right, I promise."

Not so much in winter, he repeated to himself, not the types of fever associated with the swamp. At this season, she was as safe from illness here at home as she would be anywhere, yet as he hurried her back to the house, his vague apprehensions lingered. There was something strange at Cibola, something—out of kilter. But he could not define what it was, or why it was. It was his own mood, he decided. He didn't want to part with Missy—that was it.

Luke had learned to read the faintest hints the surface of the river gave to indicate peril. He was aware of subsurface currents here at Cibola, vague flickers of warning that all was not well, but he had no way of knowing how to interpret them.

Luke was used to falling asleep at once, and could sleep anywhere, soundly, and be awake at once. If he ever dreamed, he could never remember what he had dreamt, perhaps because he had too many realities to keep in mind. The story Missy had told him about the man in the portrait interested him, because Miguel Severada's misdeeds, whether true or not—and who cared—made a good yarn, worth the telling, whereas the general run of ancestors and family histories were dull, and ought to be left to the custody of maiden aunts.

That night, just before he fell asleep, Luke was thinking about

Missy, remembering the look on her face when she had tacitly admitted her aversion for Arnold Baring.

After he fell asleep, Luke did dream, and in the jumbled distortion of his nightmare, he was the traveler riding solitary along the Natchez Trace. The woods had endless dimensions, dark was coming on, and a storm was about to break. He saw the pinpoint of light beckoning to him through the tossing trees, and plunged toward it. Missy—he heard her voice—kept on whispering to him, saying it was not a real light, it was only swamp fire, but he shouted, "It *is* real—I know!" And went galloping to reach it. He found it, and found Miguel Severada, dressed just as the portrait showed him, with the parrot, vividly green, on his shoulder.

In the dream, there was no house, just the man, holding up a lantern, calling, "Come in, sir, come in!" The parrot repeated, "Come in, come in." Luke answered, "You bring bad luck, but I'm coming, you can't keep me out, or make me disappear!"

Then the lantern was gone, Miguel and his parrot became oil paint and canvas in their frame again. Portrait, frame and all, swung back like a door and Luke found himself in Cibola's dining room. The table was set with glass and silver and china just as it had been, but no fire burned, no lamps and candles were lighted, and the draperies, drawn across the windows, made a deep green dusk, like the stormy twilight in the woods. The portrait was in its place over the mantelpiece, but dim in the shadows. Nobody was in the room. Luke called Missy, kept on calling her, but she didn't answer. Only the parrot answered, jeering, "Bad luck! Bad luck!"

Satisfied with the cut and fit of his evening clothes, the impeccable folds of his neckcloth, the set and flawless sheen of his high white stock, and the rigid points of his collar, Luke went into the parlor to wait for Frank. It seemed long, though it was only a few minutes by the clock before Frank came in.

"We have plenty of time," he said. "It'll be a good hour or more—or less—before my wife's ready." He guessed why Luke had asked to see him alone before they set out for Cibola and the ball. Pouring whiskey from a decanter, he mixed a toddy for Luke, and one for himself, offered Luke one of the armchairs drawn up near the fire, and took the other.

Luke didn't sit down or relax; he stood by the hearth, too preoccupied to realize that he had put his glass down on the mantelpiece without ever tasting his drink. Looking very tall and solemn, he began, "I have to talk things over with you first, sir, before I say anything to her—I'll get the practical side out of the way—"

Luke had inherited money from his grandfather. He mentioned the amount. "It's enough to marry on, enough by average standards, but it doesn't compare to what she has—"

He didn't seem to count on the substantial inheritance he would be likely to get from his own father, Frank noticed. So much the better. Frank admired a young man who could stand on his own two feet.

"Your career is flourishing, your future's promising," he answered. "Neither I nor anyone else could possibly think you want to marry Missy for her property."

"It's—just a stumbling block to me, sir, but I couldn't let it scare me off. I soon found out how she feels about the plantations—"

"That's the practical part I don't like," Frank admitted. "If she had to live far away from here, I don't know what we'd do without her, so it's part selfishness from our point of view, though not entirely—"

"She belongs here, sir. At first, that was the snag I didn't know how to get around, but I had to, so I've worked out what I think is a practical plan."

Luke explained what he wanted to do. He had seen a small packet he could buy. If it had already been sold by the time he could get back to Louisville—and he had already written to the owners, putting in a bid for it—there were others to suit his purposes. His father had already agreed to help him finance it, if necessary, and several businessmen in Natchez and Vicksburg were willing to invest in his project for a share of the profits.

"So if they want to come in on it, they think the plan's sound."

"It must be," Frank agreed. The men Luke had named had their feet on the ground, and would never think of risking their money on some visionary scheme. Once Luke had the steamboat, he would use it on a short run, from Vicksburg to Baton Rouge perhaps, no farther.

"A friend of mine is willing and ready to come on as junior pilot. We've been talking about it for a long time, and always intended to get started some day. There didn't seem to be any particular hurry. Now there is."

Frank listened with concentrated attention. "I remember you told me something about it when we were on the *Mogul*. Any new start's a venture, but as far as I can tell, this one makes sense."

Luke had thought out every detail. He was sure he could do well with the packet. He reeled off costs, statistics, schedules for cargo and passengers. The lower Mississippi, particularly the section he had chosen for his run, interested him more than any other stretch of the river. He was looking forward to the independence of being both owner and pilot; he had gained enough experience for it by now, and so had his friend.

Luke seemed to know just what he was doing. Frank admired his thoroughness and his zest.

"We all know everybody on the river is crying out for more steamboats—they are too few and far between on the short runs, so there's bound to be room for yours."

"And if Missy'll have me, she won't have to budge from Cibola."

"Though she might even agree to go live in St. Louis." Frank could say it now, secure in the knowledge that she would not have to go, and hugging his security.

"You can see why I wouldn't want to have to ask her to, sir. I'm not giving up anything. I'd never be able to be with her for very long at a time. And there she'd be—marooned in some town. Even if she hid it, I'd know she was moping for Cibola. It would be poor pickings! How could I make it up to her if she gave up her sort of life for that sort of life when it wouldn't suit her? The last thing I want is for her to be unhappy!"

Luke then showed Frank the sketch of the steamboat he had made when he had been at Catalpa plantation. "It's very much the same design as the one I saw—and looked over—on Tensas, but it has a shallower draught, to be able to make the runs on the bayous in low water. That's what's needed out yonder."

"I don't understand all the technical part"—Frank examined the drawing—"but the general idea—yes, it should work. How can you finance this and the other packet?"

"I might have to wait some time, but I'll keep it in mind. The other has to come first. But I know Captain McIntosh very well. He's one of the best steamboat builders in the country. He can build just what I want at Jeffersonville, and might be willing to, for a share in the profits. I've already written to him, and I'll go discuss it with him before I come back here."

"I wouldn't mind investing in it myself," Frank said, willing to risk money in much wilder enterprises than this one seemed to be, since Luke was making it possible for Missy to stay where she belonged.

"I'd rather you wouldn't just now, sir, because it isn't your line of work. Captain McIntosh won't risk a scrap of timber unless he knows he's betting on a certainty. Leave it to him yet awhile." Luke folded up his design. "You'll want to know more about me than how I expect to make money. I'll give you the names of reliable people who can tell you all about me and my family."

Frank smiled. "I'm satisfied on that score." He already knew enough about Luke and his background, and was wondering if the thoroughly respectable Lydells might not raise their eyebrows if they heard some of the stories of Missy's forebears. "Maybe you ought to know something of Missy's," he suggested.

Luke was not interested in the past, he was intent on the future. "She matters, nothing else does—or could."

Frank was relieved to bury old scandals. Luke was quite astute enough to draw his own conclusions about Roy, Juliette, and Agnes. Arnold Baring didn't count. "You have my blessing, and my wife's," Frank said. "And I'm sure Roy and Missy's mother will give you theirs. Though I suppose you'd try your chances with or without."

"I'd have to, sir, but of course I'd much rather have you on my side." Luke had already counted on the Ardens. Any young man they introduced to Missy would already be stamped as eligible for her. "Aunt Dora's promised to put in a good word for me—I've taken soundings."

Frank laughed. "It seems to me you have a clear channel, good luck, and full steam ahead."

Chapter Fourteen

The house was crowded with guests. The rooms in Missy's wing were stuffed with girls, three to a four-poster, two to each trundle bed, one to a day bed, not that sleeping arrangements mattered, as none of them thought about napping. They were much too excited and busy getting ready for the ball, and afterward there would be no time for sleep between the breakfast before dawn and early departures. Sara was the only one who was staying longer. All day there was a hubbub of arrivals and unpacking, and from afternoon on the girls were absorbed in important preparations for getting dressed.

Maids hurried back and forth, wielding fluting irons, helping to run yards of pale ribbons through the beading at the tops of corset covers, and heading the lacy, embroidered flounces of the heaps of petticoats. They shook out folds of laces and silk and tulle, supplied pins and thread, wielded curling tongs, brushes, and combs, besides answering the constant knocking on doors, meaning yet another bouquet had arrived.

Girls wandered in and out of one another's rooms, asking advice and giving it. Amy Lou Cameron was in a panic because her hair would not stay in curl. Someone else admitted her slippers were going to pinch; another gloomed because the bouquet her favorite beau had sent her clashed with colors of the garlands already looped on her skirts. What could she do? At last all major and minor problems were settled, all the thousands of tiny hooks and eyes were fastened, and one by one, the girls were ready to shine at the ball.

Missy and Sara happened to be alone in the room when Agnes Snowe came in to tell them to hurry. It was not quite sunset, and the bright rays, slanting in through the windows, revealed Agnes with unsparing clearness. Bouquets of roses, lilies of the valley, carnations, and violets were massed everywhere, some were even thrust into vases set on the floor. Philip had sent a

cluster of white rosebuds, encircled with forget-me-nots. Agnes asked Missy which one of her bouquets she intended to carry.

"I haven't decided yet, ma'am," she evaded—no, lied—because she had decided. It had not yet come, but she was certain it would arrive in due time. It was the one she waited for, the one she would take and hold tonight, even if it was a bunch of ragweed. She stared at Agnes, who always took the greatest pains with her clothes and her appearance, and who prided herself on the slenderness of her waist, and the whiteness of her complexion, which she rigidly guarded against the effects of wind, dust, sun, and glare. Her aunt, as Missy knew, had given long thought to what she was to wear tonight, and was preening herself on the finery she had put on.

She had chosen a dress of pale green *moiré glacé*—"my color," as she always said. The lace flounces were caught with wreaths of pale gold and purple heartsease, and in her hair, over her ears, Aunt Agnes had arranged tufts of gold and purple ostrich feathers. Sara was looking at her too, Missy saw, and her expression reflected Missy's feeling—the feathers were a mistake. The whole costume was a mistake in taste. Aunt Agnes was fond of boasting that she had kept her slender figure, but the low-cut neckline showed a bleak bony ridge of shoulder blades, the gaunt hollows below her throat. The pale green was no longer her color; it gave her skin the dry worn crumpled look of old kid—white grayed over. The bunches of feathers seemed strangely tawdry—like some left-behind Mardi Gras decoration seen on Ash Wednesday.

But Aunt Agnes herself didn't see it. After her nap, she had left her shutters closed, and had dressed by lamplight. She had not seen herself by daylight, did not see herself as she was now. Her mirror had given her only the image she had in her own mind, still real to her—the beauty she had once been, years ago. Flicking her fan open and shut, holding her bouquet of heartsease, giving last-minute instructions to the two girls, Agnes sailed away, complacently satisfied with her own picture of herself. Nighttime and candlelight would help her out, Missy thought, for a little while, and she could escape the truth—for a little while.

Dressed in her best black silk and finest apron, with her string of gold beads around her neck, the gold hoops of earrings sway-

ing, and a thick shawl wrapped around her shoulders, Aunt Dora held up her skirts and petticoats to cross the steppingstones over the road, opened the side gate, and took the path to the house. Greeting and being greeted by the servants rushing to and fro, she climbed the back steps to Missy's door, knocked, and went in.

"Oh, here you are, Aunt Do." Missy was standing in the middle of the room, reflected in the mirror, but not looking at herself. "I was waiting for you—" It would not occur to her to go down until she had passed Aunt Dora's inspection. Beaux, friends, even mirrors could flatter, but Aunt Dora would tell her the truth.

Before she would allow one word of praise to escape her, Aunt Dora scrutinized every detail of her child's appearance, including the "cutterments" Missy intended to use, fan, reticule, handkerchief, gloves, and bouquet. Her white gauze skirts spread widely, white flowers were pinned in her hair, and she held a bouquet of the same kind of flowers in her hand. They made a round circle like a full, pearly moon. Their bloom was edged around by a wide fluted lace frill, their stems were pressed into a gold mesh holder, set with seed pearls and little rubies. Aunt Dora gave her approval. She knew very well who had sent the flowers, and what the expression on Missy's face meant. "That the bokay you aim ter tote?" She sniffed the perfume. "Smells jes' like summertime."

A little wind had begun to rustle, coming from the south, bringing a sudden warmth. During the afternoon, clouds had formed in the west, and mare's-tails were featherstitched across the sky, turning pink and gold at sunset. They meant rain before long, but it would hold off until tomorrow. The night was going to be fine. Missy lingered a moment on the gallery, looking down at Cibola curved under the arch of the sky, curving around the pale silk of the lake. Only one star had come out, the evening star. She repeated to herself, "Star light, star bright—"

Driving to Cibola, Luke was thinking of the first time he had taken this road. Since then, not so long ago, he had changed. Missy had changed him. She had shown him that his existence was narrow, his point of view limited. If ambition, experience, adventure, and success had once provided him with all he wanted,

all he had thought he wanted, he had learned from her how much more he wanted and needed. The day when he had ridden with her over Tanglewild, she had showed him the place where he had first seen her, but on her side of the levee—not on his—a different world he had passed and repassed but had never learned. She had drawn him into a new landscape. If it had not been for her, he might have gone to his grave without ever finding the other part of his life.

The woods and fields were deep asleep, folded away in shadows. The river had become a sleek road, where the steamboats moved and sparkled, bringing guests to Cibola. Carriages were rolling through the gates, the continuous line of their lamps making a winding spangled ribbon, tying the plantation in the swamp to the rest of the world. Tonight, Cibola dominated the landscape around it.

Along the drive, through the gardens, Chinese lanterns swayed, blooming in lustrous globes of orange, yellow, blue, pink, red, and purple, each one tracing a circle of tinted light, each one haloed with a tinted nimbus. As the carriage lamps touched them, flowers flared with color. Luke caught glimpses of the house through dusky plumes of foliage, then in the patterned velvet of the gardens, he saw the silver-sleek columns, and the long windows, painted by firelight, gilded by candlelight, making the house look translucent under the dancing stars.

At first, Luke couldn't see Missy's face, someone ahead of him was standing in front of her. He had never been afraid of anything or anybody, but he was in awe of her now. She was turned a little away from him, but he had a view of the shiny coil of her hair, and her bare shoulders, amber smooth, the curve of her waist, and the glistening vapor of her dress. It seemed to be made of spun glass. The person blocking his progress moved at last and he reached her. In white-gloved hands she held the flowers he had sent her, and she was thanking him for them and the holder, then giving him one hand.

"Where did you find them this time of year? Silas could only coax a few into bloom."

"Silas and I entered into alliance. He told me where to find them."

"How did you find out I wanted some?"

"That's one of the things I needed to know." He kept her

hand as long as he could. "You and Sara look very ornamental, but breakable—" Finely finished, he thought, and fragile. "Are my dances safe?"

She showed him his name written down. "See for yourself."

The silk tassels on the *Carnet du Bal* touched his hand like a caress. He looked at his name, looked for another answer in her face.

More and more guests came, the music drawing the groups on to the ballroom, and the dancing began. The women's skirts swayed, flaring out in changing and dissolving patterns of luster and color, bright and deep and pale, blending and contrasting. Jewels caught fire, perfumes from the flowers, from attar of roses and essence of vervain mingled. From the first, the Twelfth-night ball, afterward to go down in local history, scintillated with excitement. The ranks of dowagers watched, murmured. Cousin Julia, caved in the most imposing armchair, demanded her homage. She was almost invisible under a load of jewelry, and was wearing the hideous diamond stomacher, the stones giving off only a smoldering light as they were badly in need of cleaning. From her vantage point, she gathered up all the gossip, stirred up a witches' brew of scandals, past, present and to come, and dished it out with hissings and cacklings. She noted Agnes's dress. "Ha! She's too skittish for her age! There she goes, dancing with her brother-in-law. She seems to take to this one more than she did to the first one! But then Ernest didn't take to her—"

When Luke Lydell swept Missy into supper, there was a hum of comment in their wake. The crones craned their necks and rattled at each other, just as some of them, and others now deceased, had nodded and prophesied at a long-ago ball when Ernest Severada had turned from Agnes Snowe to her sister Juliette. When the big King Cake was cut, Bill Markham found the bean. There had been the little excitement and suspense to see who would be lucky, and now everyone was eager to see which girl he would choose to rule with him. When Sara graciously accepted the gilt crown and scepter, and reigned with him, everybody was pleased. That would be a match!

Luke had no chance to talk to Missy alone. At the table, they were surrounded, and were a center of interest. After supper, her other partners, crowding around, whirled her away. He was only able to be near her for a few moments at a time again until

his own waltz would come. Then he would be able to say a few words. After supper, the dancing, flirting, the crisscross of hostility or attraction heightened to a feverish intensity. Lucie Arden had expected to be a middle-aged onlooker tonight, but there was a heady atmosphere. She found herself taking part in quadrilles, and waltzing with middle-aged partners as if they had all become young again, then she danced with some of the young men too, Luke, Philip, Bill Markham, and Roy.

Even the wallflowers enjoyed themselves, and the notable belles were buried under cotillion favors and longed to dance on forever. Bouquets were wilting, Sara and Missy had worn holes through their slippers, and had to put on new ones. The maids were kept busy mending torn frills and rearranging draggled ringlets. The houseboys swept up fallen petals, tag ends of silk and lace, carried champagne and trays of ices. Cousin Julia fell asleep in her chair and was wafted to bed. The old people began to drift away, most of the middle-aged people were going, though some of them were staying for the breakfast.

When the last waltz was announced, Frank went to find his partner. Waiting for the music to begin, he said to Lucie, "Do you remember a certain waltz we danced with each other right in this very room?"

"Every note of it," she answered. "And everything else about that night."

It had been her night. This night, with its dramas, some minor, some that would have a lasting effect, belonged to another generation. She saw Juliette, blinking, looking a little blowsy, keeping a fixed hostess smile on her face even when she nodded. Agnes could be seen, restlessly coming and going. She looked tired, haggard tonight, Lucie thought. Her nerves seemed to be on edge. Lucie saw Philip across the room, talking to Missy. He was talking fast, and looked gloomy, his black brows drawn into a frown, and there was a barely suppressed anger in his manner.

The pianist struck the keys, the fiddlers were tuning their violins. The drummers leaned over their instruments to listen to the low thumps, and taut strings vibrated with trial notes. Roy had found his partner, and was laughing with her in the midst of a circle of people. He happened to look up, and saw his sister standing with Philip by the window, and the laughter faded

from his face. Roy kept on watching for a moment, then, satisfied, turned back to his partner again.

The orchestra leader was about to raise his baton. "This is it," Philip was saying to Missy, his dark eyes searching her face. "Now you can't keep your secret to yourself—I'll find out who you gave it to—"

"To me." Luke had come up behind Philip. "So will you please excuse us?" He bowed to Missy, offering her his arm. She put a gloved hand on his coat sleeve, and he led her away from Philip. His arm was around her waist, before, or almost before the first note sounded. He forgot Philip, forgot everybody. Only Missy was real and near. With all the music and noise he could hear the silky whisper of her skirts; he saw the rise and fall of her breathing, caught the stealing perfume from her flowers. The full curves of her mouth, looking ready to be kissed, promising to kiss, made him dizzy.

"I can't talk to you now, with all of these people around us, but I have to see you. Say where and when."

"You mean tomorrow—" She knew what he would say, knew she had only a little time to decide what to answer—what to ask from him.

"Not tomorrow—today."

It was already today, early morning, she realized. In summer, it would already be light with day. Tomorrow was here!

"I must see you as soon as you can get out and meet me," he insisted. "Say where."

Missy hesitated. Most people were leaving early and Sara was the only one of her friends who was staying on, but through the morning the house would be cluttered with people. "I'll come to the—back garden gate, it'll be about ten before I can get away." If she was not on hand to say polite good-bys to lingering guests, she didn't care.

"I'll be there. When you can—come."

Like the beat of the drums, he urged, "Come, come."

The musicians were not playing a true waltz, but some Spanish street song, wandering from the place of its origin, drifting, becoming popular enough to be adapted to waltz time, and reaching New Orleans, then carried on up the river. This orchestra knew how to find the primitive rhythm, probably born in Africa, before it had ever reached Spain, knew how to stress the sultri-

ness underlying the melody. Long after it was forgotten by everyone else, Missy would remember it, mingled with the perfume of the summer flowers Luke had given her, and his touch, and the dark intensity of his face. Leave everything to him, she thought. Trust him to take care of her, and the whole problem, and she gave herself up to the present, now, while she was in his arms, letting him carry her on and on.

Lucie Arden saw her with Luke. Though the child never sang, her sense of rhythm was absolute. There was no flaw in her outward composure, or her behavior, but in spite of that, in spite of the constraint of whalebones, and the naïveté of white gauze, Missy's body had a feline, wild-animal svelteness, emphasizing the wayward, haunting tang of the music. Her face was somber; she and Luke were not saying a word to each other, but there was a peculiar quality in their silence, indicating the force of secret feeling, just as a circle of glassy calm on the river marks a whirlpool.

At sunup, the plantation bell began to ring. Horses thudded off. Carriages, heavily loaded, went out of the gates, and the bustle and clamor slowly subsided. The echoes of good-by, good-by, died away. The famous Twelfth-night ball had come and gone. It was over, but it was to leave its long echoes in the memories of everybody who had been at Cibola that night.

On her way out of the house, Missy ran into Roy, who was at the end of the back gallery, booted and in hunting clothes. He and Philip and Arnold Baring were going to Halcyon Point, for a little shooting.

Missy paused in her flight, one foot on the step. "It's going to rain."

"I reckon so," Roy agreed. "You don't seem to be staying in, cooling your heels."

She laughed, and went running down the steps. Looking back, she saw him, lounging against a column, the wind ruffling his yellow hair. He called after her, "Good hunting!"

An east, southeast wind was blowing, warm and moist, herding the clouds. Quicksilver sunlight rippled, faded. Gusts flung scarlet and rose-colored camellia petals across Missy's path, whipped her skirts and fluttered loosened strands of her hair. In the distance, through the trees, the woods sang with a thin eerie music —the pipes of Pan.

Luke had arrived early. One of the stableboys had come up, and led the horse, borrowed from the Ardens, to the stables. Luke caught sight of Missy, and went to meet her, but she didn't see him until a turn in the path brought them face to face. He looked taller than ever to her, blocking her way, shutting out her view. Smiling at her, he put his arms around her, holding her fast, kissing her mouth. She found herself kissing him too, wildly, almost furiously, until at last she summoned enough will power to struggle and break away. He relaxed his hold only a little, but kept his arms around her.

"I'm not letting go of you, so you might as well listen. You know I love you, and you came—you're here, so I know you love me—"

"Yes—" she whispered, "but—"

"You don't want to go live in St. Louis, or New Orleans!" He kissed the top of her head. "Whoever said you had to? Be quiet, and let me tell you what we'll do—"

He outlined his whole plan to her. "I had a hard time keeping quiet," he finished, "but I didn't want to say anything to you until I had made sure it would work—"

Too dazed and dazzled to speak, she locked her hands around his neck, and drew his face to hers.

Noises and voices came from the house where elderly cousins were making their exit. Somewhere nearby, one of the gardeners was raking. Luke took Missy's hand, leading her through the gate to the road; farther on, it joined narrower forks, branching to the gin, the overseer's house, and the quarters. Luke and Missy kept to the wider road, following it as it unwound in leisurely ripplings to the lake, away from the house, away from the plantation's activities. They had the road to themselves, except for one small skinny child they met on his way back from the lake, dragging a big, disgruntled turtle by a piece of rope. Hidden from sight by a line of live oaks on one side, and the garden's thick hedge on the other, Luke and Missy wandered on, his arm around her shoulders, talking about themselves and their future. They admitted they had fought against falling in love with each other. He said that he had given up right away, but that she had battled longer.

"Maybe I should have told you sooner not to worry about leaving Cibola—"

"Now is better—coming as a complete surprise. Besides, I'd stopped worrying about everything—right at the beginning of the waltz. I had a feeling you would manage to let me eat and have my cake too."

"Later on, you might think you've settled for half a loaf," he warned. "I hope you'll keep on feeling it's better than no bread." He reminded her that he would have to be away from her often. "Though when everything is settled, never very far." He didn't say he knew she had problems here, but he promised to help her all he could.

"I can put up with half a loaf," she said, "even crumbs now and then, if they're crumbs of you." Now everything tasted like cake.

The house, the people in it, seemed far away to her. She and Luke halted when they found themselves on the road edging the lake. It seemed to her that they had blazed their own trail, to discover this part of the earth and water for themselves. To her eyes, this everyday spot, so familiar to her in all weathers and seasons, had suddenly taken on largeness, strangeness, intensity. The row of crepe myrtles planted along the bank clicked their leafless, silver-tan branches with the snap of castanets, the lake rocked in corrugated ridges. Against the slate-colored water, the grass on the bank had turned ashen. On the opposite shore, the cypresses were a waving fringe cut out of black paper.

The wind had changed the placidity of the lake, giving it a malign life; wind drummed through the swamp, and tumbled the clouds across the sky. Umber and purple shadows undulated over swamp and lake and river, and all the landscape seemed to be dissolving, drifting away to follow the clouds' shadow trail.

Luke gripped Missy by the shoulders. "I hate to leave you! I'll come back as fast as I can, and never, I hope, go very far from you again. Or be away from you long— Take care of yourself! Promise me—" Almost roughly, he pulled her against him, his grasp tightening. They clung together, her lips molded to his in a long kiss.

To the east and northeast, shaggy nimbus clouds massed low over the river, and came hurrying across the lake. Neither Luke nor Missy noticed. In their silence, their immobility, they were

sculptured against the troubled restlessness all around them. Over their heads the shadows raced, giant shadows.

Luke became aware of the ebbing light, the chill in the air. He looked up, looked around. "I must get you under a roof before you get drenched—we'll have to make tracks."

"It isn't going to be much of a storm," Missy answered vaguely, "just a rain squall."

Luke picked her up, and started back the way they had come, intent on getting her to the nearest shelter before the downpour caught her. She might take a chill—already the air was much colder—and a chill might lead to illness. He carried her, because he didn't want her to have to try to keep up with his pace, and though she told him she could run, he only answered, "You're bound to be tired, and this is faster—" Even with her weight, he knew he could cover the ground quickly with his long-legged stride.

Cabins, gin, overseer's house were too far off. Aunt Dora's cabin was nearer, easier to get to, and he made for the back garden gate, reaching it ahead of the rain. Taking the shortest path, he cut through the garden, carried Missy across the road, and put her on her feet within Aunt Dora's gate. "Now run for it!" Laughing, they reached the cabin porch just as the first big drops fell.

Missy was right about the storm. The wind-driven rain came slashing across the lake, fields, and gardens, blotting out everything in a smoky whirl. Trees twisted, shutters banged. The violent downpour lasted perhaps less than half an hour, gushing out of the clouds until the wind changed, whipping around to the north. The temperature dropped suddenly, the rain slackened to a drizzle, the drizzle thinned to a mist.

By late afternoon, the flurry was over, but it had lasted long enough to change everything at Cibola. During the squall, Roy Severada was drowned in the river.

PART TWO

Chapter Fifteen

At Halcyon, after the rain, a ten-year-old boy named Abel went out of one of the cabins to look for his coon dog, and wandered as far as the main gate before he was answered by a yelping bark. The dog came loping out of the bushes, and the boy was tying a string around his pet's neck when three men on horseback came tearing along the road. One of them—Mr. Luke—slowed up long enough to call out there had been an accident, and to run as fast as he could to get Dr. Arden. "Tell him to come right off to Halcyon Landing—and to send word to Mr. 'Bijah, to come—" In a spatter of churned-up mud he was gone.

The child ran fast, faster than he knew he could, the dog at his heels. As soon as he received the message, Frank set out at a gallop, taking his right-hand man Jem with him, ordering someone to get hold of the overseer, and Big Sam, the strongest man on the place, to follow him.

"Wait here," he told Lucie, "until I can let you know what's happened. Send Eke on to Cibola, and warn him not to say a word to a soul except Mr. 'Bijah."

In the dusk of a sopping winter afternoon, nobody seemed to be stirring on Cibola, yet there was always someone about to see and notice anything unusual. The boy bringing the pails of milk to the dairy, saw Eke. One of Halcyon's folks, riding over, was an everyday thing, even if Eke was on one of Doctor's fine horses, but instead of turning in to the house, Eke made straight for Mr. 'Bijah's, a fact interesting enough to report to Little Joe, who was in the dairy, filling a jug with cream.

A little later, Annie sent him to his grandmother's with a

present of some fine ham hocks, and a wedge of cake, left from last night. He told Aunt Dora about Eke, wondering how come he would be going buckety, buckety, lickety-split headed for Mr. 'Bijah's.

At the stables, the fastest horse left in the stalls had been saddled in a wild hurry for Mr. 'Bijah, and he had sent Hiram's oldest son to Tanglewild, to tell Mr. Jack Bolton that he was needed at Halcyon Landing. Hearing of this, Hiram's wife had sent another son to his Aunt Dora's, to find out what was going on. The boy had described the sudden stir on the plantation, not knowing as Aunt Dora did that Dr. Baring, Philip, and Roy had gone off with their guns to the point, not far from the landing. She had listened to her nephew without a word, then had said she didn't know what it meant, and had ordered him to get along home before black dark.

She was afraid, without knowing what she was afraid of, and when Little Joe was about to say more about Eke, she commanded him to hush his mouth and fetch her shawl. Wrapping it around her, she dragged herself to her feet, picked up her Bible, and leaning heavily on Little Joe's arm, went on to the house with him.

Slowly, a sense of tragedy was seeping from Halcyon, to Cibola, and on to Tanglewild.

At the house, the women were in the front parlor. It was dusk now, but the men had not yet come back. Tea would be late. Missy said that she had invited Luke for tea, and had asked him to bring the Ardens. By now, she thought, Uncle Frank and Aunt Lucie would know the news, know that she and Luke were engaged. Aunt Dora knew, Sara knew—Missy had told her while they had been upstairs. She had decided to tell Philip before either her stepfather or her aunt found out. Earlier, she had intended to talk to her mother. Juliette had been napping, and had left orders with Hannah not to let anyone bother her, as she was completely exhausted from last night.

Listening for the sound of the carriage, Missy wondered why Luke was so late getting back. He had told her he would be gone only long enough to change his clothes. If Uncle Frank was out on a sick call, why didn't Luke and Aunt Lucie drive on over? Uncle Frank could always follow in his gig. Aunt Lucie could wait and come in the gig too, if she wanted.

"Why is everybody so late?" she demanded.

"I suppose they're held up somewhere," her mother answered from the sofa. Agnes said that tea would not be fit to eat. Too restless to sit still, Missy made an excuse and, with a glance inviting Sara to follow, left the room. In a few minutes, Sara joined her in the hall. Her feet were tired, and she sat by a table where a big whale-oil lamp was burning. The lamp was silver, the shade was a frame of ornamental wrought iron around intaglio panels of the four seasons. A boy and a girl gathered flowers, raked hay in a meadow, reached for grapes from an arbor, and skated on a frozen pond. Sara had seen the lamp a dozen times or more, seen it every time she came in the hall, but she had never paid much attention to it. In the daytime, the panels looked like vaguely figured alabaster; idly, she studied the winter scene. Ever afterward, the smiling skaters skimming over their pond, the little trees, and the tiny house in the distance were to be imprinted on her mind.

The light from the lamp fell on Missy as she stood near the door, looking out of the narrow panes of glass at the side, watching and waiting until she saw the little pinprick of light bobbling through the trees. Aunt Dora was in the hall too, but neither Missy nor Sara saw her. She had left the servants huddled in the kitchen, and had come quietly through the hall to sit down on the sofa shadowed by the staircase. There she waited for news, leaving her place to come forward when she heard Missy open the front door.

Only Lucie stepped out of the carriage. Missy was about to ask her why Luke was not with her, then she saw Lucie's face and what she saw made her gasp out, "What's the matter? What's happened?" Even as she spoke she realized that nothing could have happened to her Uncle Frank, or Lucie would not be here. Without knowing she had moved, Missy had flung herself forward and was clutching at Lucie's outstretched hands, staring at her tear-swollen eyes, watching her desperate struggles to speak.

"Luke—" Missy whispered. "Has—something happened to him? Tell me—I have a right to know!"

Sara, Aunt Dora, and Isaiah the butler had come out on the gallery too, standing like so many stones. Putting her arms around

Missy, Lucie told her. Roy had drowned in the river. The men had gone to the bank—to the landing—they had found him. They were bringing him back. Missy's teeth were clicking with chill. Around her were sobbings and groanings.

"Aunt Lucie, you and Sara go to Mamma—" Someone—it was Aunt Dora—flung a shawl around her shoulders. "Go to poor Mamma—" she repeated. Pulling away from detaining hands, she ran down the steps. She must go, go to the river.

Sara went flying after her. "Wait—wait—they're coming—"

Through the trees, Missy saw the lanterns' dim flickerings. The servants and the hands were gathering in the dark, and soon their voices rose in mourning. Who was coming back? Some were on horses, some were walking. Arnold Baring—Philip—Uncle Frank—Luke. By the moving light, his face looked strange to her, set in the grimness of rigid control, darkened and hollowed to the bone with exhaustion. Men were carrying a covered bier. Water dripped from it. She started forward, but a hand drew her back, a hand all hard bones, with no flesh on it.

"Later—you can see him—" Luke's voice was cracked and hoarse. She turned to him, leaning against him, struggling for control. His clothes were sodden, icy, slippery with wet mud and slime.

"He—doesn't—looked changed," Luke tried to give what comfort he could.

She did not hear the words, but she could feel the pulse beating in his wrist. His hand grasping hers had turned warm, and was warming hers, with a living, human warmth. The men were carrying the bier up the steps. Without looking at it she turned to follow, seeing the drops falling slowly, black drop after black drop, on the steps, across the gallery. Philip was walking beside the bier, his head bent, his hand over his face. She was not conscious of him, didn't see him, but as he went on with the bier, she saw the imprint of his soaked muddy boots.

"Luke—you went down in the river to find him. You—brought him home."

The coffin was in the front parlor, massed around with flowers and burning candles. The room was full of people. Missy didn't

see them, or hear the sound of sobs. Roy's face hadn't changed, not yet. Luke had brought him home to Cibola, but it was too late.

The day after the funeral, Missy stayed with her mother for hours. Lying in her bed, going from one fit of hysterical grief to another, sometimes crying out, sometimes babbling incoherently, Juliette clung to her daughter. Late in the afternoon, a sleeping draught calmed her, and she fell into a doze.

"You must get out of here for a little while, Missy," Frank commanded, "I'll stay."

Missy went downstairs to wait for Luke; he had already been here once, but she had been too busy with her mother to see him. He had gone, leaving word he would be back. Friends and cousins from Natchez and Vicksburg were still staying in the house. A murmur of voices came from the parlors. Missy retreated to the library. The fire had burned low, the windows framed oblongs of fading daylight, filling the room with duskiness. She had only a few minutes alone. First her stepfather came in, followed by Aunt Agnes, then Philip.

Arnold Baring settled himself in a high-backed chair in a dim corner. When the first news of Roy's death had reached her, Agnes had been as helpless and hysterical as Juliette, but she had recovered enough to concern herself with the heavy task of arranging the funeral and managing the crowds who had come to Cibola. Missy felt sorry for her. In the darkening room, Agnes's face had a sharp, bone-bleached whiteness, contrasting with the dense mourning she was wearing. The folds of her dress spread black around her.

Philip moved to build up the fire. Against the red glow in the grate his profile was etched in shadows. The coals crackled, flames sprang up, revealing his features. He sat down by the table. Missy had heard the account he and his uncle had given of the expedition to the point, but not from them.

"You were with Roy," she said. "Then—" Her voice failed her. As the firelight flared and ebbed the faces of the people in the room and the marble busts on top of the bookcases seemed to float giddily before her eyes. She forced herself to listen to Philip.

"We took our guns, but not the dogs. Roy didn't want to be

bothered with the dogs. We went by Halcyon, then down the road to Halcyon Landing. From there, we followed the river bank to the point."

She thought of all the times she had been that way with Roy, going beyond the levee, skirting the river's edge, careful not to go too near, as the bank was caving all along that stretch, undermined by the current. Great chunks of earth were always falling in the water, making deep raw gashes in the shore line. The cattle barge, flat-decked, clumsy and weather-beaten, belonged to Halcyon plantation. It was moored beside the landing, upstream, between the landing and the point. There had been a skiff too, also Halcyon's property; it had been kept tied to an old willow stump near the barge.

"We stayed out on the point awhile without finding anything worth shooting," Philip was saying. "I don't know how long we were there together before the three of us separated. We had agreed to meet later on near the landing. Then we lost track of one another."

Thickly furred with woods, shaped like a question mark, Halcyon Point curled out in the river a mile or so upstream from the landing. It was much longer than it was wide. A few trappers had built their shacks on tall stilts at the end of the point. They lived there most of the time. Broadhorns and trading scows often tied up at the outer edge, but they had gone with the December rise. The whole point was beyond the levee, and subject to floods when the river was high.

The comings and goings of trappers, hunters, fishermen, and cattle had worn paths and trails up and down and across, winding through the dense trees, but as soon as the three men had taken different paths, they would have been hidden from one another. Missy remembered a trail on the downstream side. If you followed it, you came to a spot where in winter, when the trees had shed their leaves and the vines had died down, you could catch a glimpse of sky and river. A V opened out, showing more sky than water, because the V's sharpening tip narrowed the view of the river and sliced off both the landing and the barge. Everywhere else on the point, at any season, willows, cypresses, swamp maples, and cottonwoods interlaced to hide the river, the bank, and most of the sky.

"I didn't know which way Uncle Arnold and Roy had gone," Philip said. "I suppose it was half an hour or so after all of us had parted company, when I heard a shot. It came from my right, from somewhere near the bank. I started in that direction, following the sound. Uncle Arnold heard it too."

"So Roy had fired it," Baring said.

Missy glanced at him, sitting passive. This was the first sentence he had contributed, and he was waiting for Philip to go on.

"I thought I'd soon catch up with Roy, but I was a good little distance away from the bank by then—at least that part of it, and the trail doubled and twisted."

The whole point and its wandering paths had been almost as familiar to Roy as Cibola. Missy thought he must have taken a short cut to the bank that the other two men didn't know.

"Where were you when the storm came up?" she asked Philip.

"Still in the woods."

"So was I," Baring said. "There was more shelter—"

"Under the branches, so you didn't hurry," Philip finished for him. "How could you guess there was any need to hurry!"

After a heavy pause, his uncle said, "Later, I guessed—"

"Later, yes." Philip was frowning at his uncle. "Even then you could only guess, you can't ever prove—"

Baring didn't answer, and Philip went on with his own story.

"By the time I came out on the bank where we'd planned to meet, the rain had slacked. No one was in sight. When I first saw his horse standing with the reins on the ground, I thought Roy might have been thrown, but right off I noticed that the skiff was gone. It hadn't broken loose during the storm, because the rope wasn't frayed. So it must have been untied."

Missy knew that the beating rain must have washed out Roy's tracks leading to the stump. The untied rope had been evidence enough. The skiff had gone, and Roy had gone with it.

"I've heard everything else." She had heard it not from Luke, but from Uncle Frank, and from some of the other men. Philip and his uncle had spotted the skiff below the barge and the landing. It had been floating upside down, close to the bank. Philip and Baring had ridden off to get help, and had met Luke at Halcyon's gate. By the time he had reached the place where the others had first seen the skiff, it had disappeared. She realized

that neither Baring nor Philip had attempted to go in the river to look for Roy.

It wouldn't be fair to blame them, she felt. Thinking of everything Philip had just told her, if he was right about lapses of time, he had reached the bank too late to be of any use, too late to save Roy's life. Missy didn't know if her stepfather could swim or not, but he was middle-aged, unfamiliar with the river. Philip was a good swimmer. How did she know? Roy himself had said so. He had taken Philip swimming in the river one mild day.

Being able to swim well was not enough, when Philip had no experience of the river. He didn't understand the current. Neither he nor his uncle had grasped the significance of the skiff's position. Luke hadn't seen the skiff, but he knew the current, and when he had seen the place where the skiff had first been located, he knew it had been swept under the barge, and knew Roy had been swept under the barge, and because the bottom of the hull was almost sure to be full of projecting splinters, Luke had reasoned that there was a possibility of finding Roy's body somewhere below the cattle raft.

Luke had dived in the river, alongside the barge; swimming under it, he had found Roy, held there because his clothes had caught on a jagged splinter. When Luke had come to the surface again, bringing Roy's body with him, Frank Arden and his man Jem had ridden up. Jem had dived in the water, and had helped Luke to bring Roy to the bank.

"What made Roy go out in the skiff in such threatening weather?" Agnes asked.

"That shot we heard—" Philip said. "He must have shot a duck and seen it fall in the water, so he borrowed the skiff and went out on the river—"

Because the river had always enticed him, Missy thought to herself, because the rising wind and wild sky had lent zest to the venture.

"It was the storm—he was lost in the storm!" Agnes pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

Missy could remember all the other times when Roy had been out on the river in a skiff during thunderstorms and windstorms much worse than the squall, though she couldn't re-

member any other time when he had been alone. If only there had been someone else with him, to man the other pair of oars! Even so, she couldn't understand why that flurry of wind and rain could have caused disaster.

There was the cattle boat, moored idle and empty. It had no power of its own, but the river made it menacing. At the bow of the cattle barge the current whirled in a strong undertow. She had often watched debris and logs carried along, then suddenly sucked below the surface, as the skiff and Roy had disappeared. Why? With his experience, Roy had known enough to keep away from the bow, well away, so as to avoid any danger of being drawn into the turbulence in front of the barge and the undertow.

"Is there anything else you can think of?" She looked at her stepfather. "Not after you saw the skiff—but before."

"No—no," he muttered slowly.

"There were no eyewitnesses." Philip's finger traced a vein in the marble-topped table, following it until it feathered away, then he clenched his hand. "What difference does it make now what we know or don't know—when it's too late?"

Missy thought of the muddy bank, the gnarled willow stump where the skiff had been tied, the waiting barge, the tree-shrouded point and the river, blackening with storm under the lowering sky.

"But I don't understand it! How did it happen? Why did it happen?"

Philip answered her, "How will anyone ever know?"

Luke had a question to ask Philip. He postponed asking, and waited for an opportunity to speak. One evening almost a week after the funeral, when Luke came in Cibola's front door, he saw Philip in the hall. As they kept out of each other's way, Luke didn't know when he would be alone with Philip again, and thought he might as well ask and be done with it.

Rosie had told Missy that Luke was in the house, and Missy was coming down to meet him. It was dusk, and the lamps were already lighted. Looking over the banisters, she saw Luke and Philip standing in the hall. At the moment, no one else was there, and the doors leading to the other rooms were closed.

The spiralings of the staircase hid her from the two men. Even when she was nearer, her black dress blotted into the shadows behind her, and she was moving without a sound on the carpeted steps.

"After you saw the skiff, did you go in the river to try to look for him?" Luke's voice was low, but his tone was incisive.

"I—we—didn't know where to look—or what to do." He added, under his breath, "It was just luck you found him." Philip turned away. Not luck for Roy, Luke thought.

Missy didn't hear Philip's murmured words. She had a glimpse of his face as he slid open the folding door and vanished into the parlor, drawing the door to behind him. Seen from above, the planes and angles of Luke's face had a harsh power. She ran down the rest of the steps.

"Don't hound him, Luke. You can see how wretched he is!"

Luke started at the sound of her voice. He looked around and his bleak expression changed. He went to her, putting his arms around her.

"I'm sorry—I didn't see you." He was sorry because she had overheard. In the evening, when he came, they usually went in the study for a while to have some time to themselves. He led her there now, drawing a chair for her close to the fire.

"Wait here—" He went in the dining room, found a decanter filled with brandy, poured some in a glass and took it to her.

"Drink it, darling." The look on her face and her cold hands frightened him. Sitting beside her, he held the glass to her lips. She swallowed the brandy obediently, until he decided she had taken enough to do her some good. When he had put the glass down on the table, he took both of her hands in his.

"Philip didn't know what to do," Missy said. "You ought to know he isn't used to the river—and with the shock—"

"I won't say another word to him—I promise." Luke slipped his arms around her shoulders.

He had asked that particular question for an entirely different reason. Evidently Philip had failed to catch its underlying significance. If he had understood, he would never have given that answer. Immediately, other questions sprang up in Luke's mind. He would keep them to himself. Just now, he was anxious to keep Missy from thinking over his question or Philip's reply.

"You didn't know you could find Roy," she said. "You might not have found him, you should never—"

"But I had to try." Not only for her sake, for her mother's, for the Ardens, but because you had to make an effort to drag human beings, alive or dead, out of the river. Often you failed, but always you tried.

"It was too much risk." She buried her head on his shoulder. "You might have drowned too."

"No, I was careful. It was all right for me to try."

She was thinking of the night when he had brought Roy home. The coldness of Luke's touch had pierced her to the marrow of her bones, making her know where he had been, what it must be like in the icy slime, the deadly dark. Now, holding her, his arms gave her warmth.

"Roy was never afraid of anything, not afraid enough."

If only Luke had been with him that day, instead of with her, she felt that somehow, in some way, he could have prevented Roy from going out in the skiff, or else gone with him, and helped him to come back safe.

She was right, Luke thought. Roy had never been afraid, never wary enough. There were very few certainties about the cause of Roy's death. No certainties, Luke amended to himself, or only one—the river had lured him, and the river had drowned him. It had been one of the unexplainable, unaccountable tragedies on the river. Yet somewhere there were facts to explain, to account for it. They were hidden, but they existed. When Luke had first heard the news, one fact had struck him. At the time, he hadn't been able to give any attention to it. Later, he had supposed it could be easily explained. Now it had taken on more meaning. Luke didn't know what it meant, he could only guess, and his guesses preyed on him. In the future, he might be able to find out where this one fact fitted into the whole.

"It's—such a waste!" Missy said. "So useless!" The full realization struck as the numbness of shock was wearing off.

Luke held her close. Even if he could find out what had happened that day on the river, he had already begun to see it would be better for her if she never knew.

"It needn't have happened!" she said.

Trying to comfort her, Luke was thinking the same thing. It need not have happened. It should not have happened.

Shut in their cabin, Eli and his wife were hunched over the fire, whispering to be sure even their sleeping children didn't wake and hear them. On the day of the accident, Eli had been fishing on the river bank. He hadn't been anywhere near the point, his wife reminded him. Anyway, he had turned back when he'd seen the storm coming up. So how could he know anything? Dr. Baring and Mr. Philip had told how it was. Eli had better keep his mouth shut, and not say a mumblin' word. Eli agreed. All the same, there it was, in his mind.

His wife said he had been a good way off, and his eyes must have fooled him. Eli didn't believe they had. He had seen, and it just didn't fit, and he had been wondering to himself if Mr. Luke had been all that much fooled. His wife warned Eli not to get notions in his head. Everybody knew Mr. Luke had been right on Cibola, so even if he had gone down in the river to bring out poor Mr. Roy, how could he have seen anything going on before then? Eli answered he was going to stay out of trouble, but he knew what other folks didn't. No, it hadn't all happened that way, not like they said.

Chapter Sixteen

Rain had begun again, streaking the window panes. The fire burned briskly in Juliette's room. Reflections from the flames wavered on the pale silk hangings and upholstery, the silver-backed brushes, on mirrors, on the clutter of pictures, bottles, ornamental boxes and the quantity of expensive feminine knickknacks Juliette cherished. She was established on the day bed, propped up on a mass of lace-frilled embroidered pillows, beneath a big crocheted shawl. Missy sat beside her, reading the second installment of a story coming out serially in *Godey's Lady's Book.*

Missy and Hannah had coaxed Juliette to eat her breakfast. Though she seldom made the effort to go downstairs, Juliette's

tears and hysteria had subsided, her appetite was coming back, she even took an interest in Missy's engagement, wanting her to wait a year or more until the family was out of mourning, and have a big wedding. Missy had refused. When Luke came back, they would be married, very quietly. A year, ten years wouldn't bring her father and brother back. Missy had no interest in a pompous wedding.

Luke had stayed at Halcyon until the end of January. Now this was the last week in February. The Ardens had gone, Luke had gone. He had begged Missy to marry him at once, so he could take her with him to his own parents. She had argued she couldn't leave home, her mother needed her. He had understood her reluctance; very well, if she couldn't go with him—if she felt her duty was here right now—then he would stay at Halcyon until the Ardens came back at the end of March. For a moment his offer had tempted Missy, but she had refused to think of it. What would he do cooped up at Halcyon? The sooner he left the sooner he could put his plans to work.

A letter had come from him today. Things were going well, give him another month or so, and he would be steaming down the river again. She had been right to insist on sending him off—she knew that. He was doing his utmost to fit the circumstances of their lives together. She had to do her share. His parents had written to her, warm and welcoming letters. The Ardens wrote often too. Tomorrow and tomorrow—but time was passing. Missy gave most of her time to her mother, talking to her, reading to her, listening to her.

At the end of the week, Juliette was going to Natchez to stay with a friend of hers. Agnes, Arnold Baring, and Missy had all urged her to go. She had cried, demurred, hesitated, and then agreed. Like the others, Missy thought her mother needed a change. In Natchez, dozens of friends and relatives would hover around her. Even in happier times, Juliette had always hated to stay in the country in winter. Missy had another reason for wanting her mother to be in Natchez. In Mrs. Wilmot's house, among her friends, she might not take as much wine "to keep her strength up," or so many doses of laudanum and other strong mixtures to make her sleep.

Missy had even spoken to her stepfather about the quantity of

medicines and sleeping draughts her mother was taking. He had assured her he was watching it very carefully. Just now she had to be "tided over." Soon, he would stop giving her heavy doses. At first he had been afraid for her reason. That danger, he said, had passed. Already, her mother was taking less, he had added, and in time, she would not need any, or so he hoped.

Baring's answer had sounded reasonable; he had seemed very kind and solicitous. Since Roy's death, Missy had hardly been aware of her stepfather's presence in the house. He came and went quietly. Maybe he had some patients, for he spoke of being out on sick calls. He had moved out of his wife's room to a bedroom at the other side of the hall, saying she needed what rest she could get, and that his comings and goings would disturb her. Missy could see it was a sensible arrangement. He seemed anxious to do what was best for her mother, Missy admitted. What she didn't understand was her mother's attitude toward him. A kind of indifference, no, it was a matter of dependence. She seemed to depend on everybody except her husband—and her sister.

Her mother was in an abnormal state of mind, Missy thought, knowing she was unnatural and abnormal herself. Everyone in the silent, shuttered, shadowy house seemed unreal to her. She was not rational enough to judge other people's reactions. Her aunt seemed to have recovered better than Missy had expected. Friends, and the elderly cousins, lingering in the house for a week or more after Roy's death, and after the funeral, had murmured, "Agnes, you are wonderful." Perhaps she was wonderful to be able to answer the avalanche of letters of condolence, to go on managing the house.

Missy had gone into her mother's room one night, tiptoeing because she had thought her mother was asleep. Aunt Agnes had been standing by the bed. Missy had heard her say, "You know Roy was my idol." And from the bed, the muffled answer, "What do *you* know about a mother's grief?"

There was a rap on the door now, and Agnes came into the room. In her heavy black, her face looked withered and pinched. "The steamboat's come, and brought the clothes I ordered for you. You'd better look at them, Juliette." Hannah and Sadie followed her, lugging in the boxes the milliners and mantuamakers had sent.

"Miranda, I took it upon myself to have what you needed made too."

Juliette sat up, watching the maids untie and open the boxes. Missy left her chair, and went to the window, muttering, "Thank you, but it doesn't matter."

"A *mousseline de laine* day dress with linen collar and cuffs—here it is." Agnes knew and observed all the nuances of mourning, defining just what should be worn by a mother, a sister, an aunt. For a sister, touches of white were the "proper thing." Agnes scrutinized gloves, parasols, mantles, and bonnets. "Your dinner dresses aren't finished yet. One's a silk, with draped folds of crepe. The other is a *bayadère* robe, with a fluted bertha and undersleeves. Of course jet ornaments only."

"Miranda has some very good jet," Juliette murmured.

Missy wasn't listening, and didn't even glance at the rustling black billows the maids were unwrapping, shaking out and holding up. For all she cared, she would wear an old gunny sack. Agnes was saying, "These are your caps, Juliette."

Juliette was querulous about the caps. Agnes criticized her as hard to please, and swept out, saying the burden of everything fell on her shoulders. Juliette became tearful again. Missy handed her a fresh handkerchief, thinking it was just as well those two were going to be separated for a while.

"Don't let her upset you, Mamma." Missy picked up her *Godey's* and resumed reading.

Missy had avoided Philip and he had avoided her since she had told him she was engaged. He had stared at her and, unable to hide his bitterness, had said he had not realized Luke had succeeded in impressing her to such an extent in so short a time, then had managed to wish her happiness, though his tone and manner had belied the conventional words.

She had broken the news to him before she had said anything to her aunt and Arnold Baring. They had been polite, even approving. Her stepfather, strangely enough, had not seemed at all disappointed because she was not going to marry Philip. Evidently he had given up hoping for it, or—as it seemed—no longer wanted it. Agnes had asked her, "Where are you going to live, Miranda?"

She had answered, "Right here, Aunt Agnes." She had seen a

queer flicker of anger, of disappointment, contract her aunt's face, and had caught her stepfather's gape of surprise.

"Here! How can you live here?" he had demanded.

Missy had explained briefly. Her aunt had said it seemed to her to be a rather odd arrangement, and Baring had made no comment. Missy felt that both her stepfather and her aunt were willing to drop Philip's cause when they had hopes of her moving to St. Louis, leaving them to rule. When they had found out she was going to marry Luke and never move from Cibola, they hadn't been able to hide they had been looking forward to getting rid of her. Perhaps she had imagined it—no, she was sure. She had caught them by surprise, and they hadn't been able to hide their genuine reaction. Since then, both of them had been on guard.

Occupied with her thoughts, Missy's reading had slowed. She resumed the story more briskly, and finished it. Her mother hadn't been listening with much attention. Dabbing at her eyes she said she wished Missy would come to Natchez with her, if only for a few days, so she could decide about her wedding dress.

"If you expect Luke back early in the spring, you must think about your dress soon, dear, and the other things you'll need."

Missy was about to say all she thought about, all she needed was Luke himself, but she knew her mother wouldn't understand or approve of a passionate longing to be in his arms. "You choose my dress, Mamma. I leave it to you." It would give her something to occupy her while she was in Natchez. "There's something else I wish you would do for me—see a doctor." Missy glanced at the row of bottles on the bedside table. "It might be time to cut down on all those strong medicines."

Missy was surprised when her mother promised to go to a doctor in Natchez. She didn't even protest she needed all the pills, powders, and laudanum she had been taking.

"I'll be glad when Luke and your Uncle Frank are back to take care of you, dear," Juliette said, her eyes filling again. "Everybody'll always envy you because you have so much money, but this family—things happen—terrible things—"

"In all families, Mamma, you know that." Missy struggled to

keep her tone brisk. She had found out that too much commiseration had a bad effect.

Juliette said, "Maybe I ought not to leave you here—I don't know, but I want to get away—"

"You must, and don't worry about me. I have the plantations to look after. I'll keep busy."

"Be careful, dear—I worry—I know it's my nerves—"

Later in the afternoon, Missy flung a cloak around her shoulders, and went on to the gallery. The rain had stopped, but the ground was too wet unless she wore sturdier shoes. She contented herself by walking up and down the gallery. She hadn't walked long when she saw Philip coming up the graveled drive. He was on foot; his hair was rumpled over his forehead, and he looked lonely and gloomy. He didn't see her, and she stood near one of the columns to wait for him.

He often went off by himself, or shut himself up in his room. She realized she had shunned him since Roy's death, and the sight of him now touched her. "Philip, wait a minute, I want to speak to you."

He came up the steps and stopped near her. His pallor, his lusterless eyes made him look ill. How he had changed! Probably her own face had changed as much. She had not bothered to glance in the mirror. He asked her if she was all right, asked her if her mother had made up her mind to go to Natchez. "I ought to be going off too."

"That's what I wanted to tell you. None of us want you to go until you can find something that suits you." She remembered he had told her that he had seized the chance to stay here as Roy's tutor to be near her. If that was true, he had only found disappointment. Whatever his reasons for accepting Roy's offer, all of his hopes, all of his plans had suddenly collapsed, leaving him adrift.

"You may regret offering me indefinite hospitality," he said. "I've been writing letters, but so far nothing has turned up."

"Something will. There's no hurry." She didn't think he seemed fit to battle the world at present. "Give yourself time."

He averted his face, clenching his hands. "I thought you would want me out of the way."

"You—were Roy's friend, and ours too." She wondered if

Philip had meant more to Roy than a dozen or more of his other friends, or how important Roy had been as a person to Philip.

"You're very generous, Miranda, thank you." He hesitated, as if he wanted to say more, then went on into the house.

When the door had closed, Missy started walking again. She hoped Philip would get a good offer soon, and until he did, find something to take up his time. Her thoughts went back to the night before Luke had left. He had taken her out of the house and the people in it, so they could tell each other good-by in private.

It had been a calm night, damp, but soft and mild, with clouds hiding the moon, a quarter moon, giving a muted wan light, enough for them to thread their way easily through the box-wood maze to its center, where there was a sundial and a marble bench. Luke had worried that she would be lonely while he was gone. Was Sara coming back to be with her? Sara, and any number of people, would come, Missy had answered. She had explained that she would ask Philip to stay until he could find a position.

Luke had agreed she couldn't turn Philip out until he did.

"I always thought it was a mistake for him to take Roy's offer," she had confessed, "though I argued with you about it."

"You make a peppery Devil's advocate." Luke had put his arms around her, begging her to take care of herself. "You know I'm coming back as fast as I can, and don't worry about me. Nothing's going to happen to me. If anything ever should, I want you to be happy."

"Don't talk like that!" She had buried her face on his shoulder.

"All right, I won't, but promise me one thing—"

Through the thickness of her cape and her woolen dress she had felt Luke's fingers biting into her shoulders. Looking up, she had seen his face, a hard outline against the gauze-soft night.

"Never let any one, or any thing, prod you into marrying Philip."

She was to remember that warning several times during the weeks which followed.

Chapter Seventeen

Juliette had been gone for three weeks, and the usually reliable Sara had been forced to delay her visit because she was ill with a heavy cold and fever. She promised to come as soon as she was well enough. Missy was so lonely that she opened her mother's letter with eager fingers. Juliette wrote that she had seen the doctor in Natchez. He had given her some different prescriptions. She didn't know what kind of medicine, but she was feeling better. The pages rambled on, listing the people who had been to call, describing the style she thought would be pretty for Missy's wedding dress. The letter was long, but normal in tone, different from the cloudiness and incoherence that had worried Missy.

She read on, read one paragraph twice. "*After you are married, it might be a good thing if Doctor Baring would start his practice here in Natchez. As you know, your father left me a house. It is quite large enough for two . . . Of course I would come to Cibola for visits . . . There would be nothing for your aunt to do in a smaller house . . . It would make my arrangements easier if you would keep her with you—she would be quite discontented here, or, I think anywhere away from Cibola . . .*"

Missy was not surprised at her mother's choice, or surprised because she wanted to rid herself of Aunt Agnes's presence. What seemed strange was her sudden spurt of courage. She must have known that her husband would not want to begin his practice again in Natchez, where he would be under the sharp eyes of bevies of his wife's cousins and old family friends. Then if he loitered at a tavern half the day, or failed to show up at a patient's demand, everyone would know it. He might ignore criticism, he might loll at his ease on his wife's very respectable income. Unfortunately for him, she was extravagant, thinking nothing of spending a thousand dollars for a lace shawl

—"You can't find good rose point for less." Though she might turn over her allowance for her husband to manage, nothing could convince her she couldn't buy anything and everything that happened to strike her fancy.

Keeping up an "elegant establishment," entertaining, traveling to fashionable watering places in style cost money. Baring would find he had an ailing, tearful, plaintive wife on his hands if he tried to keep her from running up mountainous bills. He was shrewd enough, Missy thought, to realize his wife's defenders would spring at him—daughter, son-in-law, trustees, friends, cousins, demanding to know why a woman should not spend the money left to her by her first husband as she chose. Baring had developed expensive tastes himself since he had been at Cibola. There was not enough money for the two of them to live as lavishly elsewhere. Unless he devoted himself to building up a practice.

Folding up the letter, Missy thrust it into the deep pocket of her riding habit. Her stepfather was coming down the stairs. They spoke briefly to each other. He was in riding clothes, his boots highly polished—the best, like everything he used and wore. Baring asked her if she had heard from her mother today.

"Yes, a letter came," Missy said. "The change seems to be doing her good."

"That's what I was counting on," Baring said. "That's what Philip needs."

At the moment, Philip was spending a few days with Bill Markham. He was due back sometime today or tomorrow on the next downriver steamboat.

"I'm glad he went to visit Bill," Missy said.

Baring nodded. "A step in the right direction, but not long enough, or far enough. I've done my best for him. Everybody here has been mighty good to him, but it seems to me the right thing for him to do now would be to go and earn his living."

Missy stared at her stepfather. The hall was shadowy, and he was standing with his back to the light. She couldn't see his expression.

"You were very much in favor of his accepting Roy's offer, weren't you, sir?" she reminded him. "I'm sure he is trying to find a position. We've told him he is welcome here until he does."

"If you three softhearted women would just stop coddling him, and make it clear it was time he cut his visit short— He has his way to hoe—"

"You mean take back a definite invitation? Oh, no—"

"I was thinking about what would be the best thing for the young man himself in the long run," Baring's tone was placating. "If he didn't have this roof over his head he would have to find a position in a hurry. With his education, and talents, he'd find it if he had to— The sooner he gets to work, the faster he'll get ahead in the world."

"You'll have to discuss that with him, sir. I've already committed myself, and can't go back on my word."

"Sometimes the only way to teach someone to swim is to throw him in the water—sink or swim."

Baring didn't seem to realize how badly he had chosen his metaphor or why Missy suddenly turned on him with anger in her eyes.

"Since you mention the future, sir, Mamma says she wants to live in Natchez. Of course she must have already talked over her plans with you—"

"I believe she spoke of it, but you can't expect her to make up her mind about anything just now."

"In this last letter of hers, she seems to be making up her mind of her own accord. Naturally you and Mamma always intended to have your own house. I remember you often said so."

"Certainly, certainly," Baring agreed. "But with all of this tragedy and everything so unsettled—" He sighed heavily.

"Some things have to be thought of now, and settled soon," Missy said. "Mamma seems to be thinking seriously of establishing herself in her own house. If she's interested in something like that, I think it would be good for her. When Luke and I get married, Mamma feels, and so do we, that it would be much better for us to be by ourselves, instead of having two families under one roof. Of course Luke and I would have to stay under this roof."

Missy rode to Tanglewild that afternoon, on one of her regular tours of inspection. It had been a warm, wet winter. Spring was coming early, and all along the river planters were getting ready for a "big high water." Today, a soft, southeast wind was blow-

ing, making the daffodils and violets bloom, but promising more rain. Through the gardens and along the lake the azalea buds showed streaks of color. The lake was roiled and muddy under the cloudy sky.

Tanglewild's overseer, Jack Bolton, was waiting to ride over the plantation with Missy. First they went to the house, to look at the storerooms. The lower floor was hardly above ground level. Those rooms would be flooded if the levee broke, and already Bolton was moving the supplies usually kept in them to the security of the rooms above. The hams and bacon cured in the smokehouse had to be moved to the back kitchen. Missy looked over the supplies already on hand, studied the list of what had already been ordered, and added a few more items.

The steamboats would come and go as usual, but if the water covered the road to the landing in any depth, it would be necessary to haul bulky provisions by skiff, which would be slow and difficult. Then too, the usual plantation self-sufficiency would be suspended until the flood was over. The carpenters would not be able to make anything or repair anything, so enough tools and essentials had to be gathered together and kept ready for the emergency. The carpenters were busy now making sturdy skiffs, and dugouts, hand-hewn from the trunks of big trees. The dugouts were paddled like canoes, and slipped easily over flooded land.

"Let's have plenty of everything, Mr. Jack, so we can take care of everybody who comes along."

Fishermen, trappers, hunters living on the river's edge, beyond the levees, or back in the swamp, were already straggling to the big plantations for shelter.

"More'n more of them folks is showin' up," Bolton said.

He and Missy rode on to inspect the gin. If the water came up too high, the hands had been told to move themselves and their possessions to the top floor of the gin. On Cibola and Tanglewild, the plantation bell no longer rang for sunup, noon, and sundown. During a high water, the bell was silent, and if it began to ring, it was the signal that the levee had broken.

"I sure hope we ain't going to heah no bell," Bolton said. "I'm still a hopin' the river won't give us no cause to, but things is mighty unsartin. Some of these folks what come out of the swump might be rascally. I'll keep my eye on 'em."

"Give them what they need, Mr. Jack."

The refugees seldom brought anything with them. Sometimes they moved on to higher ground across the river. Sometimes they camped on the levee. Missy was ready to dispense food, oil for lanterns, medicines, clothes, and blankets.

"One thing for sartin, like Mr. Ernest usta say, if you're aimin' to find out what any human critter is made of, jest wait until high-water time. In any mixed lot of folks, you're bound ter git one or two meaner than a cottonmouth. I've heard tell of more'n one mighty respectable actin' planter what snuck out an' cut his neighbor's levee to save his own. Or got shot daid tryin' to."

"Or didn't get caught," Missy added.

Bolton said he knew of one case like that. "Folks suspicioned him, but couldn't prove nuthin'. Now he's daid and gone, and only him, and the Lord Almighty and the Devil ever gonna know for sartin."

Missy thought of the stories told about her own family. In the night, in the loneliness veiled by miles and miles of swamp, secrets could stay secrets forever. She asked if enough rafts were ready, to take the cattle, horses, and mules to high ground.

"We got us built a plenty, and a plenty of crates for the hands' chickens and pigs and sech-like. I tell you what, ma'am, if I was you, I wouldn't wait all that long about gittin' yo' stock on to Natchez. I reckon ole man Sims is already makin' a begincement."

"He's started today on Cibola, but he has more to send. He told me he isn't getting the pigs and chickens off yet awhile."

If the levee broke, Tanglewild would be inundated in a few hours. Cibola was farther away, and as the lake had once been part of the river, and the river always built up its bank, Cibola, for the swamp, was on comparatively high ground. The flood, if it came, would reach it later, and water might not cover the entire plantation, though Missy and her overseer were not taking any chances on losing valuable stock, or even pigs and chickens.

Bolton said he would start loading the cattle in the morning, and might as well get rid of all the animals on Tanglewild while he was about it. He was only going to keep enough mules for the levee work, and for hauling supplies to the landing, and his

own horse. He admitted Missy had been right to build a big new barn. He was stacking all the hay in the loft of the old barn, reinforcing the floor of the new one, and building a ramp up to it, so if the worst came to the worst, he could get the remaining mules and his horse up there, out of the way of the water, then get them on a raft and float them downriver.

Missy praised him for thinking out everything beforehand, but found his pessimistic preparations for the worst very ominous.

"'Tain't no time to shilly-shally," he said.

Building rafts, loading the cows, horses, mules, crating up pigs, chickens, and geese, getting them all off, and safely to pasturage was "mighty tejous," but already he had put some of the hands to patrol the levees, and from the look of things, soon every man jack on both Tanglewild and Cibola would be needed there. Missy said she had better take a look at the levee near the slough. She and Bolton reached the hollow where her corn had thrived. None of the old stalks showed above the water.

It was only rain water, and would go down if there was dry weather, yet it showed her how quickly the lake could seize her field again. Through the smoky drift of moss-hung branches, she saw the swamp maples in bud, the red of their furled new leaves leaping from the ashen tangle with raw fire. She thought of the day when she and Luke had come here together. His last letter promised her he would be steaming down the river soon, on the packet he had bought and was busy outfitting. Just now, he seemed worlds away from her.

Covered with fresh new grass, bigger, thicker, wider at the base here than anywhere else, the levee looked strong, but there was the slough, with dark water trickling in it. This too was nothing but rain water, Missy reminded herself, but as her submerged field showed the old pattern of the lake, the black line of the slough showed her the former connection between the lake and the river.

The road from Tanglewild Landing to Cibola, relatively high most of the way, crossed a stretch of low spongy ground near the south end of the lake, where it overflowed in long rainy spells. A stout bridge spanned the depression, making it passable in all weathers. It was in good condition, Bolton said, and would take the wear and tear of the wagons passing and repassing from

Cibola to the landing and back. He had put men to work cutting trees and splitting logs to make a "corduroy" road. Lengths of logs, placed close together at the approaches to the bridge would keep the loaded wagons from sinking in the mud. The road would be used more and more, not only to haul supplies from the landing, but to take relays of Cibola's hands to work on the levee.

The hands, already keeping watch, had built themselves shelters against the weather out of scraps of wood. Some of the men came to talk to Missy, and showed her the sandbags heaped up inside the levee, ready to be hauled to any weak place. They aimed to hold on to the levee, the men told her. They were good workers, willing and experienced, and would do their best.

"This heah stretch is a lot of botheration," Bolton grumbled.

Missy's eyes followed the course of the slough as it wandered off into the trees. At the base of the levee it had been filled in with earth and sandbags, but underneath was silt, saturated, slippery, quavering. She thought of the Bible's warning—do not build your house upon the sand, and how thankful she would be if only she did have a foundation of sand for this stretch of levee.

So far, it had withstood the pressure of past floods, but the outcome of this year's battle against the river was uncertain. If the levee gave way, it would break here, at the weakest place—the worst place to have a crevasse, Missy was thinking. She and her overseer understood the problem confronting them. If the river came raging through, Tanglewild would disappear under water, they knew, but they could prepare for that, and live through it. After a while Tanglewild would re-emerge, and though it was troublesome and expensive to repair the damage from a flood, to start a crop so late in the season, the land would be unharmed. On the contrary, the fields would be enriched.

The problem would be the same as it was now, the lake, the slough connecting with it, and an added problem—the Blue Hole. When a levee broke, the force of the current coming through the breech scoured out the earth at that spot, leaving a miniature lake, sometimes no wider than two hundred yards, but always deep, and always filled with river water.

"If we get a break, does that mean we're sure to be left with a Blue Hole?" Missy asked.

"Yes'm, I reckon so. I ain't never heard tell of no crevasse

without'n none. You git all that water a rarin' and a pitchin' in, you bound to git you a Blue Hole."

"Then we'd have to put the levee back when we rebuilt it," Missy said. Not much farther back, but even a few feet would make a difference.

"It would go across the slough just the same," she meditated. "And would be that much closer to the lake, and with the Blue Hole right outside of it—"

"Yes'm, it'd be a mighty weakly, sobby place, and we'd have plenty of trouble on our hands every time we got us a big high water, but if yo' levee gives down on you this time, there ain't a thing on God's earth you kin do but throw out yo' Blue Hole and build behind it."

"Other people have their problems too," Missy said. "Up at Hole and Corner plantation, the land's caving in the river. That's worse than having part of your levee running across wobbly ground."

"A lot worse, ma'am," Bolton agreed, counting over the plantations he knew and knew of that had lost acres because the land had caved in the river, undermined by the current. Sometimes, through the years, the river would slowly eat up whole plantations. Tanglewild might disappear temporarily under water, but it was not crumbling away.

"It's no use worrying about where we might have to rebuild the levee, and if we do have to, how we are going to hold it in all the big high-water years to come," Missy said. "We'll fight to hold it through this one. Maybe we'll win."

Even if they won the battle, it would be only a temporary victory. Sooner or later, the river would threaten again, and renew the war.

Bolton invited Missy to ride to the top of the levee and take a look at the river. She didn't want to go, didn't want to see it, but she smothered her reluctance and went. There was no way she could avoid looking at the river, traveling on it, thinking about it, or struggling against it.

At the top of the slope, the levee no longer gave an illusion of solidity. It dwindled into a puny thread. Darkening haze hid the opposite shore. It seemed to have vanished out of existence. A little sunshine tentatively rayed out from behind an edge of cloud. Where it touched the water the mild light became a savage

glittering. Heavier clouds drifted over, casting a shadow, turning all the wide river iron-colored, iron cold. Clotted mats of drift and masses of debris rocked, eddied in circles, then spiraled out of sight. Spars, branches, whole trees, their roots sprangling like upthrust claws, rushed by, urged by a wild vitality not their own.

A roof top bobbed and waltzed; daubs of foam gnawed at its wrenched-off beam ends. It was sagging in the middle, about to break in two. Before long it would shred into fragments. Missy wondered what had happened to the people the roof had once sheltered. Heavy ropes of current, knotting with gristly strength, tangled with webs of countercurrent. Eddies wrinkled around the sleek flattened surfaces of the whirlpools. Watching all of this turbulence, you expected crash and uproar, but the river raged and raced south without a sound.

Missy was late getting back to the house. As she rode up, the windows looked dark. Behind the pale columns, there were vistas of shadows. Even when she was near enough to see the reflection of firelight on the window panes, she didn't feel she would find a cheerful welcome indoors, or a sense of being at home. Her nerves quivered with vague forebodings, like the lone traveler in some tale of the supernatural, coming upon a long-deserted mansion, seeing the restless riot and flare of eerie lights where phantoms held their revels.

One of the stableboys saw her go through the back gate, and ran up to take her mare. Instead of turning to the flight of steps leading to her rooms in the wing, Missy went around the gallery, pausing to look at the western sky. The sunset didn't hold much promise of clear weather. The clouds lifted enough to show a band of lemon-yellow light above the darkening swamp in the distance. The wind had dropped, and in the stillness, in the twilight, a mockingbird began to sing, the first one Missy had heard since fall.

She listened, smiling at the varied imitations of other birds' songs until she heard a horse thudding on the drive, going to the front of the house. Then feet crunched on gravel, clumped on steps—her stepfather's feet, and his voice, talking to Isaiah at the door. Missy stayed where she was to avoid meeting him. She knew his habits. When he came in, before he went upstairs to

change his outdoor clothes, he had his toddy in the library. Missy gave him time to settle himself by the fire. Moving quietly, she walked along the gallery to the library windows. The shutters hadn't been closed yet, but in her black riding habit, and in the gathering dusk, no one in the room would see her. When she looked in the nearest window, there was Arnold Baring—what was now his favorite chair had once been her father's chair. The fire roared. A full glass glinted amber in Baring's hand. He was sitting opposite the window. Missy could see him clearly.

In the library, with the doors closed, he wouldn't suspect anyone was watching him. Spying on him was a more accurate term for it, but Missy had no scruples about it. On the table beside her stepfather a tray held a decanter, a silver jug of hot water, a silver sugar bowl, a plate of sandwiches, and a plate of cake. He drained his glass, seized two sandwiches, finished them quickly, made himself another toddy, heaping in sugar. His hand, reaching for a slice of cake, showed tufts of reddish hair in the firelight. Icing smeared his mouth, crumbs fell unheeded on his stock and vest.

Standing in the shadows outside the window, Missy studied him. Even a year ago he had given the impression of being younger than he was. Seeing him as he lolled at his ease, off guard, he showed the effect of these months at Cibola. His ruddy skin no longer suggested a country freshness and healthiness. It had become the veined, glazed, empurpled flesh of a heavy drinker. Layers of fat distended his face. The pendulous, fleshy folds of his jaws shook as he chewed. With his frock coat unbuttoned, his big body looked shapeless, paunchy, swelling out of the chair.

Most of all, Missy was struck by the expression on his face. Maybe it was her own nerves, the distortions her dislike created, maybe it was a trick of firelight, changing this Arnold Baring into someone she had never seen before. Or did he, thinking he was alone, feel free to discard his usual mask of bashful, kindly, well-meaning simplicity? He reached, he grasped, he munched, he guzzled, and the face she saw reflected greed, a sly craftiness. The coarsened features and voracious jaws seemed to her gross, brutish.

Which face was real? From the garden, the mockingbird was calling bob white, bob white. Like a warning, telling her it might

be important for her to find out, and not let either her own imagination, or an almost perfect imitation fool her.

After tea, Missy forced herself to stay in the parlor instead of taking refuge in her own rooms as she usually did. After Luke had gone, she hadn't lingered downstairs a single evening. She had avoided her aunt, her stepfather, and Philip as much as possible, but tonight she made up her mind to sit through some dull and dreary hours in their company to learn what she could about these three people shut up in the house with her. Sheltered by the little hand screen she was holding up to protect her face against the blaze, apparently only idle and listless, Missy was alert to everything the others said, and the way they said it.

Here they were, a dwindled and subdued group in mourning, making an outward show of being linked together by a common loss. Her mother's letter, the encounter with her stepfather over Philip had penetrated through the isolation where Missy had cocooned herself. Her spying through the window might have given her a false picture of her stepfather's face, she admitted, but the letter from her mother, the talk with Arnold Baring were real.

Philip was sketching a design for Aunt Agnes to work in needle point. His face was thin, fine-drawn, emphasizing the structure of his bones, the subtle cut of his features. When he had finished, he showed his drawing to Missy. She admired it, and he offered to make her a pattern too.

"I'm no good at needle point or embroidery. I'd only get tangled in all those many-colored threads. This one is particularly complicated."

"If it was simple it wouldn't show Aunt Agnes's skill in working in her threads without getting tangled."

He sat down beside Agnes. "Blue-purple for the grapes, shades of light and dark green for the vines, brown and touches of dark gray on the stems. Pearl gray for the birds, with yellow beaks. No, a little clear yellow on the tips of their wings, and bright coral for their beaks."

"Thank you, Philip—it's perfect, just what I had in mind. Take a look at it, Arnold."

Baring held up the paper, said it ought to be very pretty, but that Philip's part of the work had been easy. His tone and manner seemed just as usual, but Missy caught, or thought she

caught, a flicker of hostility. Perhaps because she had found out the hostility was there. When had it begun? She couldn't pinpoint the exact date, but, for some reason she didn't know, it had sprung up since Roy's death.

Aunt Agnes hadn't changed toward Philip. She still liked him, wanted him here, and didn't seem to have any inkling that his uncle was anxious to see him go. Arnold Baring hadn't said a word about that to Aunt Agnes, Missy guessed, or to his wife either. Did Philip know? There was something mocking in his face as he watched Baring. Philip knew, Missy decided.

Gus brought in the coffee tray, putting it on a low table. Agnes moved to the straight-backed chair in front of the table to pour the coffee. Her hands moved deftly, filling the gold-lined Du Barry rose cups. The servants always called this china the "Dewberry set." She put three lumps of sugar in Baring's cup. Her dress was a dismal mourning crepe, but its puffs and drapings gave it a studied elaboration. Even in the mellowing glow her face was pinched, withered, sharpened. It wasn't her age. Aunt Lucie was only a year or two younger, and she was still fresh and pretty. Perhaps Aunt Agnes showed the shock of Roy's death. If she was capable of caring for anyone, she had cared for him.

Missy said she had heard from the Ardens. They would soon be back at Halcyon.

"I suppose on account of the high water," Baring said.

Missy knew they had always intended to be at home again by the end of this month. They had left later than they had planned, on account of Roy's death, and had gone only because Uncle Frank had committed himself.

Agnes ignored any talk of them. She rang the bell. Gus had waited for its summons. He came, took away the coffee things, and brought in another tray holding brandy, liqueurs, and cordials.

"Leave the fruitcake," Agnes ordered. "Dr. Baring might take some." She left the pouring and passing of the brandy and liqueurs to Philip. Missy didn't take any.

"Aunt Agnes, I had a letter from Mamma today."

"And she seems in better spirits," Arnold Baring added. "We can be thankful for that. I've been mighty worried about her."

"Naturally—" Philip murmured.

Baring gave a deep sigh. He was sitting on the opposite side of the fireplace from Missy, holding his brandy glass carefully in his thick hand. The tailoring of his black frock coat helped to disguise his girth.

Agnes had been staring straight ahead of her. She turned to Missy. "Did—did she say anything about coming back?"

"Who? Mamma? No, not a word, Aunt Agnes."

"Then don't you go and encourage her—"

"No, no, don't put it in her head. She's much better off where she is," Baring said. "With things as they are here and the river getting higher every day."

His reasons were sound enough, Missy granted, but she had caught her aunt's shrill anxiety, and couldn't believe it came from concern for a sister's health and spirits.

Philip's long-fingered hand caressed the glass he was holding as he savored the brandy's bouquet, but his almond-shaped eyes glanced from one face to another. He had an air of reading secret meanings. Baring asked Missy when she expected Luke. Soon, she answered, but he couldn't be certain yet when he would be able to come. In his last letter, Luke had told her he hoped to get back to her in the next two or three weeks. He was more than ever in a hurry, as he didn't like to think of her at Cibola during a high water without him. She didn't want to talk about Luke to these three people. The very mention of his name created tension.

Philip was standing in front of her, holding out a glass. "Do please drink a little brandy. You look very pale tonight."

She thanked him and took the glass. "I'm all right."

Agnes frowned at her. "You do look washed-out."

Missy craned her neck to glance in the pier-table mirror, and was startled to see her face so heavy eyed and colorless.

"There's always a considerable amount of illness going around this time of year," Baring said. "Colds, coughs, lung congestion, stomach complaints."

"There seems to be less than usual this spring."

No reports of any serious ailments had reached Missy, not from the servants, or from the hands on Cibola, Tanglewild, and Halcyon. Her stepfather admitted they had been lucky so far, but with the wet changeable weather everyone ought to take precautions.

"You ought to build yourself up with a good tonic. I can mix you something to bring the color back to your cheeks."

Missy thanked him. "Maybe I should take something. It's no time to be laid up. High water means an extra load of work." She wasn't concerned with her health, but her appearance. Luke was coming soon, and she wanted to look her best.

"I have my hands full with all of the confusion going on in the house," Agnes complained. "The whole day men were dragging barrels and crates upstairs, and piling them in the spare rooms."

"We have to lay in extra supplies, Aunt Agnes, and the downstairs storerooms are already full," Missy explained. No one could calculate in advance how much would be needed not only for the plantation, but for the people drifting here. Some of them went on, but some of them stayed, making camp on the levees. No one could foretell if Tanglewild would be under water and if Cibola would be cut off by a flood, or if the flood came through a break in the levee, how long it would be before the water went down.

Baring turned to Missy. "I'll make you up a tonic tonight, so you can start taking it."

"What sort of medicine is it, sir?" Philip asked.

"Just the same tonic Dr. Frank gives all of his patients. He says it works wonders."

"I know it well," Missy said. "It tastes just like bitterweed."

"I can put something in it to make it taste better," Baring promised. "But don't expect it to be as good as Annie's cake."

Missy noticed he had finished off the big wedge of fruitcake Aunt Agnes had cut and put on a plate within his reach. He had eaten it up with less obvious greed than he had revealed to her when she had watched him from the window, but whether it was an important or a minor trait, his greed was real.

Good nights were said. The little group in the parlor separated. Missy was tired, but it was only ten o'clock, and she was too restless to fall asleep for hours. She turned into the library, lighted the lamp on the center table, lighted a candle and, taking it to the bookshelves, searched for something to read. Choosing a couple of novels, she put the candlestick back in place, blew out the candle, and brought her books to the center table. She was ready to turn out the lamp when she heard Philip's voice.

"Leave it lighted a few more minutes," he said, "and let me talk to you in peace."

She invited him in, sat down on the nearest chair, and offered him one.

"Never mind—" he stood by the table. "I won't take advantage of your patience much longer, either here in this room, or on Cibola."

She asked him if he had found a suitable position, and if so, where.

"I'm undecided still, but I'm negotiating for a place to teach. I don't know yet if anything will come of it."

"I hope something will, if it's what you want."

"It isn't a question of what I want—I'll take what I can get." He glanced at the books on the table. "You came in here for these, so you must try to read through these long nights. Daubing with my paint brush is my way of courting sleep. Everyone in this house tries something—" He was watching her face carefully. "I wonder—"

"Wonder what?" She felt something mysterious in his manner.

"Nothing—nothing. Only late at night the house is so quiet. Then sometimes I think I see phantoms moving around—"

"It's so gloomy in this house now," she sighed.

"But you believe Luke Lydell will come soon. What do you mean by soon?" he asked.

She noticed he seemed skeptical about Luke's return.

"I don't know."

"You expect him by and by—that's an elastic space of time—but someday he'll come to make you happy."

The bitterness in Philip's voice, the mocking smile he gave her told Missy how much he hated Luke.

"If you don't want that portrait I did of you," Philip said, "I'd like to have it."

"It's yours anyway, you can do what you please with it, but—" She stood up and began to move to the door.

"It's not you, it's only a blank outline, but it's a little something of you," he said. "When I began it I had high hopes for it, but—well, I know I'll never fill in that empty outline with paint. I couldn't bring myself to work on it any more, but at least I can remember those few hours when you were posing for me, and the face you showed me then. So I'll take your ghost portrait

with me." Philip had followed her to the door, bringing her two books from the table.

"Leave your ghosts behind you," she said.

"I only wish I could—"

"Well, they'll soon fade and be forgotten." She put her hand out to take the books from him.

He was standing half in the glow from the lamp, half in shadow. "Do you know what a struggle it is for me to leave here in spite of everything? Do you expect me to be happy anywhere else?" He caught her hand and kissed it.

Missy dragged her fingers away from his lips. "Don't make scenes, Philip—I can't stand it!" She turned to go out of the door.

"I'm sorry, Miranda, you must forgive me this time." He gave her the books, and held the door open for her. "I'll put out the lamp."

"Please do. Good night, Philip."

"Good night, Miranda. Soon it'll be good-by."

With his pale face and dark clothes, he was all black and white, a Pierrot with a broken heart.

Chapter Eighteen

A big blue bottle labeled TONIC, with directions to take four tablespoonfuls a day, was waiting for Missy in her room. Rosie had brought a spoon. She was curious about medicines, enjoyed dosing herself, and being dosed by Aunt Dora. Missy was mighty poor and peaked-looking, Rosie said, urging her to start in taking her tonic right now, so as to put a little meat on her bones before Mr. Luke came back. Maybe a dose would make her sleep better, Missy thought, and yielded. Rosie shook the bottle, pulled out the cork, sniffed, said it smelled good, and poured out a full spoonful.

Missy swallowed the tonic without making a face.

"It tastes like thick sweet wine, and molasses, and something else—I can't tell just what—but it goes down easy." Much easier than her Uncle Frank's prescriptions, which were uncompromisingly medicinal. Dr. Baring had carried his own craving for sweets into this mixture, and had made it cloying.

"After you've swallowed it, you know you've had a dose," Missy said. In spite of all disguises, the ropy dark stuff had a disagreeable, biting aftertaste, lingering in her throat.

In her curtained bed, Missy heard the rain begin again, making sounds like running footsteps. Rain would weaken the levees. Today's encounters kept weaving in and out of her mind until she fell asleep.

When Rosie came in the room to open the shutters the next morning she complained she hadn't slept at all, her stomach hurt her so bad. Missy sent her to bed, sent for Aunt Dora, and tried to find Arnold Baring. He had left the house early, taking his black doctor's bag with him, but no one knew where he had gone. The roads were bad. If he had set out to pay a sick call some distance away, he would be late getting back to Cibola. Missy wished for Frank Arden. One of the hands from Halcyon, coming on an errand, said Doctor had sent word to get the house ready, so he and Miss Lucie must aim to come home soon.

Missy went in to see Rosie, and found her much better. Aunt Dora was with her. She said Rosie didn't have any kind of fever, and she didn't know exactly what kind of ailment had struck her. By dinnertime Rosie's stomach cramps and sickness had gone. She still felt weak, but was hungry again. Either Aunt Dora's medications, or the girl's natural health and strength had cured her. Missy was very much relieved. She had been worried about Rosie.

To improve her looks, and to give herself enough energy for all of the extra work a high water made, Missy followed Dr. Baring's directions and took her doses of tonic. The strong black coffee she drank after dinner made her feel queasy. She tried to convince herself she was affected by the weather which was warm and muggy. Maybe she and Rosie had the same thing, some minor stomach trouble. Trying to be prudent—it was no time to be ill—she went up to her room. Her dress was too hot and heavy, it weighed her down. All of the black she was wearing made her face look as green as a spring onion. If she had to

take the tonic four times a day, she thought she might as well take her third dose now, before she forgot it. Perhaps it would make her feel better.

She filled up the spoon, and swallowed the brownish, glutinous stuff, shuddering and gagging. She reached the washstand in her dressing room just in time to throw up in the slop jar. Little pains jabbed her. There was a vile taste in her mouth. She tried to pour herself some water but her hand would not hold the pitcher. On her way to the bed, sharp pain struck her, doubled her over, made her gasp and retch. Staggering, bent over, she reached the bell pull, dragging on it with both hands. The pain darted down her legs, into her arms, up to her throat.

Shivering with the cold sweat breaking out all over her body, Missy crawled to the bed, and tried to climb in it. It was too high for her. She was struggling to reach it when Sadie, answering the bell, came and found her. The sight of Missy, knotted up, clutching weakly at the coverlet, not able to speak, her face drawn, her loosened hair darkened with streaks of sweat, was enough to start Sadie screaming.

After Sadie had helped her on the bed, Missy felt the pain ease. Footsteps clattered along the gallery, voices babbled, a blurred circle of faces wavered around the bed. There was Aunt Dora leaning over her. Missy mumbled she was better. All she wanted was to get out of her soggy clothes, lie still to ward off the pain and nausea, and be let alone. Aunt Dora wouldn't let her alone. Before she would let Sadie and Rosie take off Missy's clothes or even wash her hands and face, Aunt Dora asked her what she had eaten—what besides her dinner. Nothing—nothing except her tonic. Vaguely she saw Aunt Dora pick up the bottle from the bedside table, smell it, and put it aside.

Sadie wanted to get Agnes. Aunt Dora told her to wait until later. Propping Missy up on pillows, she forced her to swallow milk and more milk, then slippery raw eggs, then sweet oil. Missy couldn't taste anything. She did as Aunt Dora told her, until at last she had taken enough—at least it all slid easily down her throat without requiring much effort on her part—and was allowed to lie flat. Sadie and Rosie took off her clothes, eased her into a nightgown, washed her face and hands, put her between fresh cool sheets, combed her hair, changed her pillows, tied a nightcap on her head, then summoned her aunt.

Agnes came hurrying in, scolding because nobody had called her sooner, lamenting because Dr. Baring hadn't come in yet.

"From the look of you last night I was afraid you might be coming down with something," she said.

Missy muttered she was better now. The pain had ebbed to needle flashes. The nausea had gone, leaving only weakness. Her whole body felt sore. The touch of the sheets, even the touch of warm water made her shiver, but she was all right now. Somebody put a hot brick to her icy feet, and pulled the covers up around her. Someone was gently wiping her forehead with eau de cologne. She was aware of the aromatic pungence of smelling salts. She dozed off.

Her stepfather's voice roused her, and she opened her eyes. He was talking to Agnes and looking down at Missy. Agnes was holding a lighted candle. Aunt Dora was standing on the other side of the bed.

Agnes said, "Do you think we ought to let her mother know, Arnold?"

"No—please—" Missy whispered. "She'll worry—"

"Let's go easy," Baring said. "I don't think there's much wrong. It's no use to frighten Juliette for nothing in her state of nerves." He took Missy's pulse, looked at her tongue, and asked questions. When Aunt Dora answered them, he listened, nodded, and diagnosed a bilious attack, very usual in spring, he pointed out, and brought on by a combination of getting overtired and nervous strain and perhaps an imprudent diet.

"She'll be all right, Agnes. I don't see any cause for alarm. I'll fix up some prescriptions for her to settle her stomach, and help her liver. I'll send something to make her sleep, too. Rest is what she needs."

He patted Missy's hand, left the bedside, gave Aunt Dora instructions, and went out. Agnes asked if there was anything she could do. Aunt Dora said she herself would take care of Missy, and would stay in the room with her.

"If you need me, call me right away," Agnes said. She followed Baring. Philip was waiting on the gallery, outside the door. Missy heard him asking how she was, heard his uncle's calming voice, and Agnes breaking in to say it had been a very sharp attack.

"When I first saw her she was a dreadful color—I don't know

what could have given her such a violent indigestion. She's still very weak."

Missy was too tired and sleepy to pay any more attention. Aunt Dora moved quietly to stand by the window, listening to every word. Dr. Baring soothed Agnes, and the three went off together. Aunt Dora went back to the bed and sat down. After an hour or so, Arnold Baring came with the medicines, two bottles besides the sleeping draught. He gave directions to Aunt Dora, telling her when to give the doses, and how much to give of each. He took Missy's pulse again, found it stronger, and said he would not be in during the night unless he was needed, as it would be better not to disturb her. He picked up the bottle of tonic, held it up to see how much was left of it, put it down, and said Missy must start taking it again in a day or so. After this little spell, she would need building up more than ever. Let him know at once if there was any change in her condition during the night.

When the door had closed behind him, Missy opened her eyes, muttering she wasn't asleep, she had been playing possum to get rid of him, and hoped she had seen the last of him for a while. "I don't want his doses. Nobody can make me touch a drop of that disgusting tonic."

Aunt Dora agreed she didn't have to take any more medicine, just drink some good warm milk and go right on to sleep. The hot milk, the soft murmurous voices—Aunt Dora's, Sadie's, and Rosie's—were soothing. Missy slept all night. After Aunt Dora had sent the two girls to bed, she locked the doors leading to the outside galleries, both in the bedroom and the sitting room, locked the door leading from the sitting room to the room beyond, bolted all the shutters, and settled herself in an armchair by the bed, dozing, then waking to see if Missy was all right.

In the morning, Missy woke up demanding breakfast, finishing everything Aunt Dora gave her to eat. Dr. Baring had looked in on her while she had still been asleep, Aunt Dora said. He and Mr. Philip had gone out to see the cattle loaded on the barges. Mr. 'Bijah Sims wanted all the men he could get on the levee. A mighty big flood was rolling down, bigger than any even old Job could remember or had ever heard tell of—upriver, the levees were giving way. Some backwater had come out of the

swamp and was spreading on to Cibola's fields, not much yet awhile.

Before he had left the house, Philip had picked a bouquet of flowers for Missy, and had written her a note, saying Aunt Dora was guarding her like a dragon, and would not let him put his head in the door to speak to her. He thought he could be more help out on the levee than in the house, but if she needed him, or wanted him to do anything for her, send for him. She smiled at the thought of Philip on the levee. He would hate it all, the mud, the sun, the bursts of rain, the swarming gnats, mosquitoes, and flies. He would find the company of the overseers wearing, and rather dislike taking orders from them; he'd get tired of watching Mr. 'Bijah's jaws rotating from a chunk of chewing tobacco, bored with watching the sweating Negroes heave sandbags wherever they were needed. A taste of toil and moil might do Philip good!

Silas had picked a bunch of his finest roses for Missy. Annie heaved her great bulk up the steps to find out what Missy had her mouth set for in the way of dinner. "Some more of your floating island," Missy told her. "I wasn't feeling well yesterday before I had that pain. The floating island was the only thing that tasted good to me."

Aunt Dora said it did her good, too. Annie speculated about what had caused Missy's spell. "Nothing I ate," she answered. "I didn't touch any dinner, except the custard, and that wouldn't hurt a newborn baby." It could half kill you if it was at all spoiled, but Annie used only the freshest milk and new-laid eggs. She lumbered away. Busy as they were, Mr. 'Bijah and Mr. Jack Bolton left their levees long enough to come to the house to ask about Missy. The hands came too, to find out how she was.

After dinner, she wanted to get up, wheedling Aunt Dora into letting her sit in a chair instead of staying in bed. Her legs felt full of pins and needles, insecurely fastened to her body. Otherwise she was all right. "I guess Rosie and I had the same thing."

Rosie, however, was entirely well. "She had a lighter case," Missy speculated. "I hope it isn't going to be one of those ailments that run through the whole plantation." Nobody else had it so far. Aunt Dora didn't think it was likely anyone else would get it.

During the morning Agnes had come in and out of Missy's

room, staying only a few minutes each time, enumerating all the tasks she had to get done. After dinner, she came back, bringing her petit point with her. "I'm glad you're well enough to be up. This is no time to be an invalid." Her needle flickered in the light as she drew it in and out of canvas held taut in oval hoops. "Do you want me to write to your mother and tell her you had a bilious attack? Do you want her to come?"

"I'm on the mend. I don't see any use telling her anything until I see her."

"Well, if she came, she wouldn't be any help, just a care—"

"Not to me! I'd be glad to look after her—poor Mamma! I just don't think she'd stand being here right now." Not shut up in a house besieged by floods.

"That's what I mean—she's better off in Natchez, everything is out of kilter here now." The shouting and bellowing and bawling meant that the last head of cattle was being driven down the road to the landing, to be sent off. "I suppose we won't have milk and butter for the table," Agnes sighed.

"We're keeping a couple of cows for ourselves, and keeping some of the horses, and of course enough mules for the levee work."

Furious bellowings resounded. The red bull was being urged along to the landing. Slowly the uproar subsided.

"The rooms next to mine are lumbered up with boxes and barrels and crates," Agnes said. "I can't get through them to go into the main part of the house—I have to go by the gallery."

Missy didn't answer. Her aunt need not go past other people's windows. She could use the shorter gallery opening onto the court below. It was exactly the same distance as walking through the intervening rooms, and there was a door leading into the upper hall.

Just then, Rosie and Sadie came in, carrying an enormous box. It had come on the steamboat. Missy told them to open it. Layers of careful wrappings were undone, showing folds of white—a wedding dress, with the wreath of orange blossoms, the short white gloves and satin slippers to go with it, and silk stockings with embroidered clocks. Laughing and excited, the two girls took the dress out, holding it up for everyone to admire.

Aunt Dora wouldn't let Missy do anything but look at it. She was still too weak to go through with the effort of trying it on.

For once, Missy thought her mother had showed perfect taste.

"Of course you'll use the lace you have for a veil," Agnes said, rubbing a fold of the airy *mousseline de soie* between her fingers. "I hope between now and whenever you plan to be married your complexion will have improved, or you'll look very sallow in all of that white. Though of course you can't make any plans with things as they are."

"I've asked Dr. Baring to make them—to find a place of his own. He can't go on living here indefinitely."

Agnes seemed about to speak, then for a minute or so couldn't find words. "Well, you seemed to have settled everything without consulting anybody!" she said finally. "Though the man you intend to marry doesn't seem to be in any hurry about coming back."

She folded her petit point, thrust it in her work basket, and got up to go. "What about me? What am I supposed to do when all of these changes take place?"

"Why stay on here as you've always done," Missy said, but she wasn't really thinking about her aunt. Her eyes filled with tears as she watched Rosie close the box and take away the wedding dress and wreath. Neither her father nor her brother would be there to tell her she looked beautiful in her veil and orange blossoms.

That night, instead of coming in to see Missy, Arnold Baring only came to the door. He asked how she was feeling. Aunt Dora said she was weakly, but getting on "tolable," making Missy smile at her pessimistic air.

"You told a fib, Aunt Do, you told him I'd been taking his medicines, but if he had asked me I would have fibbed too, to get rid of him. Don't let him in here. I'm well enough to get out myself tomorrow." It was no use to argue with Aunt Dora about sleeping in the room, and Missy had to admit she was very glad to have her right here for company.

Half-asleep, she listened to Aunt Dora's low-voiced singing, "Who's over yon-der, dressed in red—Must be the chil-dren Moses led—Comin' for to carry me home." The cadences rising and falling, the beat of the rhythm lulled her. It was too warm to draw the curtains all the way around the bed. Before she closed her eyes, Missy watched the dim light on the table shining on her engagement ring. Luke had put it on her finger the

night before he had left. Even the low-turned lamp woke a sultry fire in the ruby, and little sparklings in the diamonds surrounding it. Falling asleep, she dreamed she was hurrying through the maze to meet Luke.

She was running, and calling to him, but the paths led her in dizzying circles, and she felt she was lost. She knew Luke was waiting for her in the open circle in the middle of the maze—in the usual place—and she was in a breathless race to find him. When she reached the heart of it, he wasn't there. Someone else was there, by the sundial, cloaked and dark—a long shadow. Not Luke. Before she could move or speak, the dream had ended, and she woke up, with startled relief. Though while she had been dreaming she hadn't been afraid, once awake, she had to struggle against the lingering oppression a nightmare brings.

Chapter Nineteen

The morning was brilliant with sunlight, hot sunlight, bringing out the perfume of the wistaria climbing over an arbor at the back steps, trying to climb to the upstairs gallery. From her window, Missy watched the bumblebees, their black velvet bodies dusted with golden pollen, crawling in and out of the wistaria blossoms, in a delicious, surfeited stupor, thrumming with a sleepy murmur. Very likely they were industrious, but they didn't seem so.

The sound of her aunt's voice, coming from the wing opposite hers, made Missy turn away from the window. Aunt Dora grumbled at her for demanding her clothes and insisting on going out. To pacify her, Missy had to promise not to go beyond the gallery. Rosie folded up the shawl she had wrapped Missy in yesterday. On the table were the accessories of an invalid, smelling salts in a silver filigree case, a palmetto-leaf fan bound in black ribbon, a bottle of eau de cologne, a book of sermons Agnes had brought in, and the bottles of medicine arranged in a row on a tray.

"Throw them all out, Rosie," Missy said. The very sight of the big dark blue bottle sent a reminiscent shiver through her. Philip had sent her flowers again, or rather picked them. Today he had chosen lilies, white lilies, putting them in an alabaster vase. At first, Missy had thought it was a beautiful combination, yet now it struck her that the vase, with its handles and pedestal, strongly suggested a funeral urn.

"Take them away too, please," she said.

She went down the back steps, and saw Arnold Baring on the lower gallery. He was sitting down, while little Gnat pulled off his muddy boots. When he turned his head and saw his stepdaughter, Baring looked extraordinarily shocked. "What—what are you doing out here?" His face reddened with a mottled flush, his skin took on a greasy shine. It was a hot day, and his mud-stained boots showed he had been out on the levee in the sun.

Missy was surprised by his manner and tone. "You said nothing much was wrong with me, sir. I feel better today, and wanted to get some fresh air."

"Yes—yes, of course, but it's imprudent to come out so soon after one of these bilious spells. However, if you're careful—" He had returned to his usual manner. "Be sure and take your medicines."

"I don't need them any more, I've stopped taking them."

He frowned at her. "My dear Miranda, how do you expect me to cure you if you don't follow my directions? Take your tonic—you need it."

"It doesn't agree with me, sir. I threw it out."

Curbing his impatience, he offered to mix her something else, saying he realized that anything she had taken immediately before her attack would seem disagreeable to her for a while. He was obviously annoyed with her, as any doctor might be.

"Thank you, but don't bother, I don't want anything."

Baring wiped his face, hiding it for a moment behind the folds of his handkerchief, then managed to smile.

"Now you're behaving like a spoiled child!"

He turned away, saying he had to go up the road a few miles to see a patient, but would go back to the levee later. Instead of getting on the horse waiting for him, he went in the house, wearing the shining clean boots Gnat had brought out and put on him. Half an hour later, he came out again and rode off. By that

time, Missy had moved to the side gallery, and was talking to Jack Bolton, who had come to the house to find out how she was feeling, and to report on the news he had gathered.

There had been reports of levee breaks in Arkansas, and some in Louisiana, and one not far upriver, at Hole and Corner plantation. She knew the family who lived at Hole and Corner, and was sorry for their bad luck. Jack Bolton said the water was up around the house, the way it would be on Tanglewild, and that wasn't the end of the bad luck. Ole lady Emmet, who was most a hundred and had been expected to go for the last several years, had died last night.

"It sho is too bad, since she was bound to go, she hadn't of went before they had 'em a cree–vasse," he said, relating what someone on the steamboat had told him. "Or hung on a spell longer until the water went down. Of cose, the po' ole lady didn't have no choice, but it's mighty inconvenient disposin' of her."

For one thing, she had been defrauded of the kind of funeral due her and her kinfolks. Instead of being in a good shiny coffin, drawn by a hearse with six horses, with black nets thrown over the horses and black plumes on their heads, the hands had to make a coffin out of rough planks—whatever wood they could find. After they had put her in it, they had to tie ropes on it and lower it from the gallery into a skiff, and once in the skiff, it had to be rowed to the steamboat. Bolton said it wasn't on this morning's steamboat.

"I reckon they're still wrasslin' with gittin' her in and gittin' her to the landing. The wust of it is she won't have no wake. It would rile her plenty if she knowed the river done tricked her out of bein' waked proper."

He looked around and said they'd be getting some of the back water from the crevasse at Hole and Corner, but wouldn't get as much on Cibola as on Halcyon, though it was nothing to worry about. The steamboats going downriver were packed with people getting away from the flood, and there was a passel of Indians camped on the levee a piece below Tanglewild Landing.

"Let them stay there, Mr. Jack. Give them something to eat if they don't have enough. They might be glad to get some corn meal, and a barrel of molasses or so."

"Some of 'em are mighty light-fingered, but they ain't goin' to do much totin' off as long they're a settin' on the levee."

"Mr. 'Bijah sent word this morning that the levee was holding up fine," Missy said.

"Flood crest ain't come down on us yit, ma'am. That's when it's goin' to be mighty ticklish."

"You'd better tell the hands if they have anything they particularly value they might as well take it to the gin today or tomorrow." If the levee began to crumble, the hands on Tanglewild wouldn't have much time to take anything but themselves, their children, and their cats and dogs. "Chickens—they'd better send their chickens over here, if they didn't send them on the rafts."

Missy looked out at the vivid bloom everywhere. The warm south wind had made the azalea buds open into flowering overnight. If the river water came up in the garden, it would kill the camellias, azaleas, and Cape jessamine, and if it reached the roses, they would die too, but at least they grew fast. Even in this rich soil, it would take years for the camellias and azaleas to reach the size and splendor of Cibola's.

"If there's a break, how much flood do you think we'll get over here, Mr. Jack?"

"Ain't no tellin', ma'am. We ain't nevah had this much of a high water, but won't none git in yo' house, or come that close to hit."

"What about the gardens?"

"You got backwater on yo' fields right now, an' if we git a levee break, the flood's liable to creep up in yo' garden, but only a little ways, no fur piece—mostly round about the lake edge—it's bound to do some risin'."

All of the flowery border along its banks would have to be replanted. If the levee crumbled, the flood would cover all of Tanglewild, and rise high around the house. Though the water wouldn't come up as far on Cibola, or deepen as fast, or deepen as much, everybody here would be marooned. Nobody could come to the house, or go any distance from it, except in a rowboat or a dugout.

Bolton congratulated Missy on being able to be up and around. "What you reckon you was took with so sharp, ma'am?"

She quoted Dr. Baring's diagnosis of a bilious attack.

"Might be, but if you start to ail agin, we'll tote you ter the landing and git you on a steamboat to Natchez, but I don't reckon you're liable to no mo'." He cautioned her to take good care of herself, and stay close to the house. Bears, wolves, bobcats, panthers, wild hogs, driven out of the swamp by the rising water, were prowling around. Snakes were everywhere.

Missy promised to be prudent, thanked him and sent her thanks to the men on the levee for working so hard.

Bolton heard a steamboat blowing. "Every time them dang things come or go, 'pears like the wash is comin' clean over our levee when they make a landin', but the pilots go slow, and ain't sent a bad wash yit. I reckon Mr. Luke'll be comin' along by and by."

Missy said she expected him soon now.

"Don't you fret about no cree–vasse, ma'am. If hit comes I aim to set snug in my house, and keep an eye on the place—won't see nothin' but water for a spell, but I'll come on over heah in my rowboat to let you know how we're gittin' on. Settin' out a flood's no work, it's the work after the water goes down."

Missy quailed at the thought of the aftermath, scouring out mud and slime from the lower rooms of the house on Tanglewild, out of the cabins. Warped floors would have to be repaired, and any undermined foundations. Dead animals, rotted vegetation would stink in the hot sun. Rank weeds would spring up thick. The work would get done, the seed would be planted —a late crop was exposed to hazards, but with luck, a crop would be made this year. The levee would be rebuilt, behind the Blue Hole.

Missy said she wasn't going to worry about something that hadn't happened, and that she couldn't do anything about if it did happen, except put up with it.

"A crevasse ain't goin' to do Cibola no harm," Bolton assured her, and went off.

Wagon wheels were grinding along the gravel drive to the back of the house. Missy went to see who had come. One of the hands, ole Uncle Mat, too feeble to work on the levees, had brought up another wagonload of firewood. A group of children came, bringing more bundles of sticks tied together, trotting to stack them on the lower galleries. They spoke to Missy in

chorus. She answered, calling each of them by name, praising them for their work. They ran back for more bundles.

Agnes came to the window. She didn't see Missy sitting near the corner of the house, but she saw the wood piled up on the side gallery, and began to scold Little Joe for letting the children put it there. "Go tell them to take it all to the back gallery."

Missy went to the window, and as soon as Little Joe had left the room, told her aunt the firewood had to stay where it was. It couldn't be stacked where the servants would stumble over it every time they came and went on the back gallery. She went after Little Joe and told him that Miss Agnes hadn't understood.

"Very well, if you want the house to look like a tumbled down old barn!" Agnes sniffed. "The upstairs gallery is stacked with wood up to the eaves—we have more than we can use in a year."

"We have to have enough not only for ourselves, but for everybody on the place, and for Tanglewild too—if they give out," Missy explained. With the backwater coming up, dry kindling would be hard to find, and soon, if there was a flood, there wouldn't be a dry twig on Tanglewild. When the children had scampered away, Missy said, "Please don't contradict my orders, Aunt Agnes, it only makes more confusion. If you don't understand why I give them, ask me first, and I'll tell you."

Framed in the window, Agnes Snowe stared not at her niece but at the wood. In profile, her features showed their neatly chiseled outline against the darker room behind her, but she pinched her lips together as she always did when she was angry. She seemed about to speak. Missy waited, thinking it was ridiculous that the crisis between herself and her aunt should come for such a trifling cause as kindling deposited on the gallery. Either Aunt Agnes could climb on her high horse, threaten to go to Cousin Julia's and make a disagreeable scene, or she could abdicate with whatever grace she could muster. Not that any of her attitudes made any difference. Missy had gathered the reins in her own hands. From now on, nobody was going to dispute her rule, either indoors or out. Confronted with calm, impassive assurance, Agnes chose to keep quiet, preserving a surface peace. She retreated from the window.

Philip came in for dinner, saying he wanted a glimpse of civilization.

"Are you all right now, Miranda?"

Missy said she was. His dark eyes appraised her. "You look well—more like yourself than you did before you were taken ill. All of us are anxious about you. Aunt Agnes was worried about whether or not to let your mother know—"

Agnes seemed nervous and uneasy, Missy noticed. Philip went on, "When you were ill the servants were sunk in gloom. The overseers and hands on three plantations demanded constant news of you, Miranda. An endless file of people streamed to the house to ask. All the rest of us could have vanished off the face of the earth without causing half as much commotion."

Missy thanked him for the flowers he had picked for her, and for giving his help on the levees.

"I doubt if I'm much use, but at least I do what I'm told."

Philip's remarks seemed to carry more meaning than his words actually expressed, but whatever he was trying to convey was too subtle for Missy to catch.

Agnes said, "Your uncle doesn't spare himself either."

"I met him on his way to the levee, so he won't be in for a while," Philip answered. "But he spared himself this morning. He didn't show up. I think he went to Halcyon. Yesterday one of the hands was bitten by a snake, but he's all right I heard."

"Mr. Jack didn't tell me." Missy was afraid of the hands getting snakebitten. "Are you sure the man's doing all right?"

"I'm certain. They didn't send for Uncle Arnold. The overseer at Halcyon attended to the man. I believe Uncle Arnold's excursion was to find out when the Ardens are due back. Of course he had the usual answer, by and by."

Missy had been glad to see Philip come in, thinking his presence at dinner would relieve the constraint between herself and Aunt Agnes. Instead, he heightened the tension. In spite of being outdoors these days, he didn't look well. His skin had darkened in sun and weather, but it was not a healthy brownness. He had changed his mud-spattered riding clothes and mud-crusted boots for indoor clothes. His high white collar and black stock threw his face into relief, accentuating the shadows around his eyes and his underlying pallor. Neither he nor Aunt Agnes were eating. Missy's own appetite was coming back. If she had been alone, she would have enjoyed her dinner.

"The Ardens'll be back soon," she said, for she knew that

they wouldn't linger away from home after the end of March. "And Luke'll soon be along."

Because she was in mourning, Missy usually wore her engagement ring on a chain around her neck, hidden from sight. Today, the ring was on her finger. She looked up, struck by the quality of Philip's stillness, and saw he was staring at the glow of the ruby, the glitter of the little diamonds.

"I–I thought Luke was busy with some very complex scheme," Philip said in a strained voice. "I suppose he's found it unworkable, and has given it up, hasn't he?"

Missy was surprised at the question. As if Luke would give up! "It's workable."

She didn't explain any more. A silence fell between the three people at the table. She felt that Philip had hoped, even expected Luke to fail, and had counted on failure to keep him away for a long time. What had Philip hoped to gain from Luke's absence? Something–maybe everything. Maybe Philip had thought there was a chance for him to stay on at Cibola always.

"Luke's found the boat he wanted," Missy said, "and he's probably on his way by now."

In his last letter, which had come a few days ago, Luke had told her that if she didn't hear from him again very shortly, it would mean he had started down the river, and as she had not heard any more, she thought he must have set out.

Philip made no further comment. From his expression, from his sudden pallor, Missy guessed her news was a shock to him. She saw he was struggling to maintain a surface calmness.

When he spoke again, he said to him, "I don't suppose you remember I told you my letters had borne fruit at last."

"You told me you had good prospects, but that nothing had been settled."

"I've had an offer, and it's too good to refuse. I didn't have a chance to tell you about it while you were ill." He added that the position he had decided to accept was to teach in a school in North Carolina, and he would soon be starting for his destination.

"But what are you going to teach during the summer?" Agnes asked.

"The headmaster wants me to give lessons in music, and languages and drawing to a group of pupils."

Missy said she was glad he had found something to suit him. It would be better for him to go before Luke came back, but until then, she preferred to have him here rather than to be shut up in this house with only her aunt and his uncle. No, if she was right, and Philip had been nursing any lingering hopes, it was just as well for him to get gone at once.

"I'm sorry you're going to be so far away from us, Philip," Agnes sighed. Glancing at her, Missy felt she was sincere. Then Arnold Baring had never mentioned his little scheme for urging Philip away in a hurry. No one in this house confided in anyone else. Philip said he didn't think his efforts would make any difference one way or the other on the levee.

"Nobody expects you to give up a good offer to stay and guard it," Missy smiled.

"It's a great strain, waiting and wondering if it's going to stand up or not," Agnes fretted.

"I'm afraid you're showing the strain of living for days with your nerves on edge." Philip gave her his arm to leave the room. Agnes complained she was exhausted, and had a splitting headache coming on. Missy sympathized with her. "Do you think it's the symptom of some kind of illness? Are you feverish?"

"No, it's just one of my bad headaches—I'm used to them. I think I'll go and lie down."

Missy advised her to take a good rest. A nap might help. Philip added, "You do look tired, ma'am—I don't believe you've been sleeping very well."

Holding up her skirts, Agnes slowly climbed the steps. Missy watched the black-clad figure move out of sight, feeling sorry for her aunt. Philip said he would go on back to the levee, but as he lingered, Missy sat down in a tall-backed chair. Outdoors, a breeze was rippling the leaves, and bringing the perfume from the garden into the house. There were mixed sounds from birds quarreling and birds singing.

"With all of your tact," Missy told Philip, "you ought to know better than to tell a woman she looks tired."

In spite of his appearance of politeness, Missy felt everything he had said to her aunt through dinner had been tinged with an underlying mockery.

Philip smiled. "A slip of the tongue."

"Was it? Your tongue's well trained. I had the impression you were deliberately annoying her."

"Your nerves are on edge too. All of us are under a strain." He was standing at the foot of the steps, facing her; the front door was open, the silver-gilt sunlight and a swaying pattern of leaves and branches made a flickering brightness in the hall. The clock began its chiming, then struck the hour, one o'clock. With the first note of the familiar chimes, Missy started a little.

"You see—" Philip smiled again, and glanced from her to the clock, a tall narrow French clock, telling not only the time, but the phases of the moon. "You see, we're in the dark of the moon just now."

"Have you told your uncle where you're going to teach?"

Missy was determined to find out the answer to some of the puzzles.

Philip's handsome face was moody. "Aunt Agnes will tell him and save me the trouble."

He was standing near the steps, his long fingers caressing the banister rail.

"He seemed very much concerned about your future. Hasn't he talked to you about your plans?"

"Not a word has he said about my plans, present or future. Has he been expounding what he's mapped out for me to Aunt Agnes?" Philip was smiling, but it was not a pleasant smile.

"He did to me. She wasn't on hand."

"Strange he should choose you. Something was in the back of his mind. I'd like to know what it was."

"So would I," Missy said. "Why is he in such a hurry to have you go?"

Philip's face sharpened with anger. "So that's what he said!" Then he grew more wary. "For one thing, he has no further use for me here. I pride myself on my astuteness, but Uncle Arnold fooled me completely. I thought he wanted me because he was fond of me! His only close family tie!"

"He certainly seemed fond of you." Missy was willing to do her stepfather that much justice.

"It was all brought off very naturally, wasn't it? Uncle Arnold wanted his dear nephew, his dear stepchildren to meet, to be fast friends! With Uncle Arnold secure in our midst."

Missy could supply what Philip left out. Her stepfather had

seen he could never win her friendship, but a susceptible girl might very easily fall in love with his charming nephew. It had been easy to maneuver Roy into giving an invitation to Philip. Baring's plan for Philip to win Roy's friendship and her heart had almost worked.

"My uncle's a very adroit puppet master, but when his puppets won't dance the way he wants, he tries to get rid of them."

Her mother, her aunt, Roy, Philip had all been his puppets. Missy had never been, but Baring had not known it completely until lately. Luke's coming, Roy's death, her engagement had made Philip superfluous to his uncle.

"That may be one reason, Philip, but it doesn't explain his hurry. Why wasn't he satisfied to let you choose your own time? Why did he let me see he's determined to be rid of you? Why did he come to me to ask me to get you out of this house?"

"Did he go that far?" With his long eyes narrowed and his mouth thinned, Philip's face had a masklike quality, a malevolence she had never seen before.

"He didn't put it quite as baldly, of course, but that's what he meant. I told him he was the one who would have to get out."

Philip began to laugh. "That was neat! I wish I had heard you!"

"Why do you hate him? What's happened to make you hate him?"

"I've found out he wants to stay on here. He knows I've found out, so he's afraid of me." Philip's face still bore the stamp of his rage, but he managed to speak quietly.

"That's no reason why I should send you off, or why he should be afraid of you. There must be something else."

"He wants to stay here—always."

"He knows that's entirely out of the question." She hadn't found out the real reason why uncle and nephew hated each other. Neither of them would tell why. She was sure Philip knew what had driven Baring to make an effort to get rid of him, but Philip was hiding what he knew. Then he must have some definite motive for keeping it secret.

"Just when did you make it clear to Uncle Arnold he would have to get out?" Philip asked her.

Missy thought over the last few days, and remembered.

"It was here in the hall—it was in the morning, the day before I was taken ill."

A strange expression came on Philip's face. He turned his head aside, lowering his eyes. "Now I wonder—" he said in a low voice, more to himself than to her.

"Wonder what?" she demanded, longing to find her way through the mazy threads.

He faced her again. "Nothing, nothing at all."

"Why don't you come out and say what you mean?" she flared. Maybe he didn't dare say—

"Because I really don't know what I mean. Now I must go help save your levees, Miranda. The least I can do for you is pit my puny efforts against the Mississippi. But if I were you, I wouldn't take any more of my uncle's doses."

"I won't, I've told him so." Then a deeper meaning began to seep into her consciousness. "What are you insinuating?"

"I have no idea what goes into my uncle's prescriptions." He moved a little closer to her. "Only—you've been generous—you've been kind to us, haven't you? Feeding us, sheltering us, letting us share all Cibola's luxuries. You've been a great, good friend to me when I badly needed a friend. The three of us ought to be grateful. Well, we aren't. All of us want more, much more!"

Before she could catch her breath to answer, he turned and went up the steps, disappearing around the curving spiral of the staircase.

Chapter Twenty

Philip had deepened her awareness of mysteries lurking, and startled her by his oblique warnings. She went to her room by the back steps. From the upstairs gallery, she saw Philip riding off to the levee, spurring his horse to a wild gallop. Rosie and Aunt Dora urged her to lie down awhile. Missy settled herself on the day bed, closed her eyes and tried to nap. It was no use,

she couldn't relax enough to sleep. Next she tried to read, but the images in her own mind came between her and the pages of her books.

She persuaded Aunt Dora it would do her much more good to get outdoors for a while, and promised to stay just in the garden. Aunt Dora was going back to her cabin to do her work and get out her wash while the sun was shining. She agreed it wouldn't do any harm for Missy to be in the garden, if she would be careful not to overtax her strength and keep her eye peeled for snakes. Aunt Dora was coming back to the big house at nightfall to stay with Missy.

"I'll cross the road and pay you a little visit, Aunt Do," Missy said. "That's only a few feet beyond the garden, then we can keep each other company, and walk on over here together."

If they weren't back at the house well before sundown, Rosie grumbled, she would send Little Joe with a lantern to fetch them. It was no time for folks to be traipsing around after dark by themselves. Instead of the thin-soled, ribbon-tied kid slippers she wore indoors, Missy had put on a pair of stout boots, as a precaution against snakes. Even though she intended to keep to the garden walks, snakes could hide in the bushes. Aunt Dora cautioned her to be sure to take her shawl, in case the warm uncertain weather turned off cool, and went on to her cabin. It was too hot for a shawl, Missy thought, but she dared not let Aunt Dora see her without it, and obediently carried it with her.

In his last letter, Luke had urged her to go to Natchez, though he had added he didn't expect her to budge. Of course she was going to stay right here, where she belonged, where she had work to do. Natchez was four or five hours downriver. Even if she didn't have the responsibility of two plantations, did he think she was willing to put that much more distance between them? When he came, he would find her waiting.

The day before he left, Luke had given her a small, beautifully made pistol, with a mother-of-pearl handle. It was even smaller than the one her father had given her years ago. Luke had extorted a promise from her not to ride or wander far from the house alone, and even when she didn't go far, to take the pistol with her. Most of the snakes were harmless, but Little Joe had killed a cottonmouth by the kitchen steps just this morning, and she remembered one of the hands at Halcyon had been

bitten. The poisonous cottonmouth moccasins were hard to see. They hid themselves well, but they had a peculiar scent, giving warning to anyone who could recognize that faint but distinctive odor.

When she went downstairs again, Missy turned into the hall, and went into the study to get her pistol. She kept it locked in one of the drawers of her father's big desk. The pistol was conveniently inconspicuous—it fitted her hand, and no one would notice she was carrying it, as it was almost hidden in the folds of her skirt, and entirely hidden when the fringes of her shawl fell over it. She locked the desk drawer, closed the study door behind her, and left the house by the back way. Being outdoors again cheered her, though as long as she could be seen from the windows she didn't feel she had escaped from the atmosphere of the house. No one was watching her now, she thought. Philip had gone to the levee, her stepfather was probably there too, and her aunt was sequestered in her own room, behind closed shutters.

Though she didn't know it, Missy was being watched. Not by the three people she had in mind—her stepfather, her aunt, or Philip. Aunt Dora had circulated orders to "keep an eye on her," indoors and out. Little Joe, busily sweeping oak catkins from the flagstones, spoke to her as she passed, then stopped, to lean on his broom and keep her in view until the garden path turned and shrubbery hid her. Silas was out there with some young boys helping him. All the able-bodied men were on the levee. Silas would keep track of Missy, until he knew she was with Sis' Dora. Later on, Little Joe would go for Missy and his grandma, and walk back to the house with them, sunup or sundown.

Missy soon came upon Silas wielding his rake, grumbling at the little boy on his hands and knees at a flower bed, his small fingers diligently plucking out weeds and sometimes a plant. Missy spoke to the child, encouraging him by telling him he was getting on nicely. Silas was worrying because the water might come up and wizzle his garden. What kind of times were these? Bears were wandering around. He'd seen wolves loping out of the swamp. The tracks just beyond the garden gate had been made by a panther. Gates wouldn't keep them out. They would climb in the trees.

After Missy had told him the water wouldn't be apt to come far in the garden even if the levee did break—Mr. Jack had said so—Silas was somewhat soothed, though he bemoaned the poor pickin's he had for help. Things didn't look as they rightly should. Missy assured him his gardens looked beautiful, and she had never seen the azaleas bloom so well. Mollified, he turned to the subject of her health—what he had said to Sis' Dora, what she had said to him. Nobody around had ever heard tell of any ailing like Missy's. He warned her not to go far off in the booshes, she might feel faintified and fall out.

Missy promised to be careful, made inquiries about his rheumatism, listened to what he had to say, sympathized with him, and then went on, as far as the back gate, to see how much water had come up over the fields. The warm south wind was whirling and scattering petals. The live oaks were shining with the rosy-bronze satin of their new leaves. In the distance, the swamp was one vast lake from overflowing rivers and bayous. From the swamp, the water had spilled out over the fields, not far yet, but widening, shining in the sun. The change in the landscape gave her a sense of unreality. The plantation's routine had come to a standstill. All of the activity was concentrated in the battle against the river. At dusk the lights would move back and forth. The Negroes would sing as they worked and kept watch; the fires they built would swirl up, making here and there a tiny glint on the Mississippi's enormous darkness.

A horse was clumping along the muddy road. Missy saw it was Cibola's overseer riding up. She stayed at the gate to talk to him.

"Evenin', Mr. 'Bijah," she said.

"Evenin', ma'am."

He unfolded his lank body from the saddle and came to the gate.

"Them levees of our'n is still settin' there. The weak stretch is lookin' pretty good, all things considerin'. After I'd et me some supper at my house, I reckoned I'd better come tell you howdy before I went back down yonder. I was mighty glad to hear tell from Bolton you was able to be up and aroun'."

Missy said she was feeling spry again, and asked him how his health was holding up, working night and day in all of that mud.

"I ain't ailin' so's you'd notice it, thank you, ma'am," he an-

swered. "I been takin' me a heap of Injun medicine to keep off the chillin'." He looked out at the fields. "I reckon the backwater'll be comin' up right along, but it ain't worrisome. Most of that yonder's from Black River swump. If you was to git reel close, you'd see it was mixin' with brown Mississippi, hit's comin' from them levee breaks no'th of us. A little while back, we had us two sandboils."

Missy asked where. He told her one was near the slough, but on the levee. "We got 'em stopped." Most sandboils could be ringed and smothered with sandbags. If one started in the slough, that meant the river was eating in where the soil was softest, easy to dissolve, and unless the seeping could be stopped quickly, the levee would crumble. It might not be possible to stop it.

"Where was the other sandboil?" she asked.

"Down a ways from the slough. Dr. Barin' was on hand when them boils started—" He paused, his Adam's apple working up and down.

Missy wondered if he was about to tell her her stepfather had been a help. Mr. 'Bijah's silence lengthened. She realized he had something on his mind, and tried to lead him on by saying everybody must have had to work fast.

"Needed all the help we could git—these days you gotta scrape the bottom of the barrel, we even got some of them Injuns to pitch in. I reckon Dr. Barin' didn't take in why we hadta put all the men to workin' on that there one closest to the slough the fust thing. Anyways, he ups and orders the men off'n hit, an' tolt 'em to go 'tend to 'tother one—"

"He had no right—" Missy began to flare, then gritted her teeth against her exploding temper, determined to keep up an appearance of calm and dignity.

"It was confusin' to the hands, ma'am, but we didn't have no time to waste argufyin'. Bolton an' me went right on an' kep' the men at stoppin' that one what was aimin' to do us the mos' damage. Looks like our speakin' up so plain didn't set too good on Dr. Barin'. He said it was high time for a change of overseers aroun' heah."

"I'm sorry this happened, Mr. 'Bijah," Missy's head was swimming with rage. "I can't understand why Dr. Baring behaved that way."

Mr. 'Bijah agreed it was mighty peculiar. Dr. Baring had al-

ways been pleasant-spoken, you might say kind of mealy-mouthed. "Bolton didn't want to bother you none, but like I tolt him, the best thing was for you to hear the straight of hit."

"I'm glad you told me, it's something I need to know." Her stepfather could not have chosen a worse time to make trouble. "You and Mr. Jack have been here a long time. I'm sure you know I want both of you to stay on. You are in charge, you and Mr. Jack, you're the bosses. You can count on me to back you up. I'll speak to Dr. Baring—"

"Don't say nothin', ma'am, leave it lay."

"When did this happen, Mr. 'Bijah?"

"The evenin' after you was took sick."

"If I'd known, I would have set things straight before now."

"There weren't no call to fret you when you was low. He ain't acted up since. We don't aim to quit you, and we ain't gonna let him rile us none. Bolton an' me'll jes' go along handlin' things our own way. We got yo' say-so." Abijah Sims wasn't deceived by her low voice and quiet manner. He had known her ever since she was born. "I reckon what I jes' tolt you makes you mad clean through, ma'am, but it ain't a good idee for you to go stir up strife with Dr. Barin'. He's a man grown and you're mighty young. More'n likely he'll jes' tell you it didn't happen thattaway, so 'tain't no use to ax him."

"I won't ask—" She knew she wouldn't get the truth. "I'll tell him to leave the house, leave the place." Her stepfather had committed the unforgiveable sin of undermining the authority of the overseers, and in a time of crisis. She was lucky they cared enough for the plantations, enough for her to stay.

"Mr. Luke and Dr. Frank'll be along. You leave it to them, ma'am. We got enough on our hands right now. If you was to tell Dr. Barin' to scat, he'd grin like a mule eatin' briers and say you couldn't make him, bein' you're under age."

Missy had forgotten she was a minor. She had never found out what her legal rights were. Her hand tightened on the pistol she held under the fringes of her shawl. In her present state of anger, it would be better not to exult in the heady sense of power it gave her.

"If Dr. Barin' don't have no mind to clar out, you couldn't budge him no more'n you could move a cypress stump. Mr. Luke can budge him—mighty fast too. Hit's funny though, how come

Dr. Barin' raised a ruckus in the first place. Seein' as none of us can figger it out, he's liable to be kind of teched, and it don't do to meddle with crazy folks."

He added it was time to be pushing back to the levee, advised Missy not to stay out in the damp too long, dragged himself up into the saddle, and rode off. She watched him out of sight. There was good sense in his advice to wait and do nothing. Only a fool would contradict orders given by experienced men, and give his own. This was the first time Arnold Baring had ever seen a sandboil, or found out there was such a thing. He was not the kind of person to lose his head in an emergency, on the contrary. He was no fool, and she didn't think he had suddenly gone crazy.

Against the violet-tinged gray of a cloud the shining meshes of the swamp became a raw, acid green. Missy turned away from the gate, taking a winding path. She was tired of trying to puzzle things out herself. When Luke came, she would thrust all the bits and pieces at him, and let him make sense out of it. Her path led through thick hedges of azaleas, their flowering branches sweeping the ground. A coon's little pointed face and bright eyes peered at her briefly from a branch. The wind sounded through the trees, but where she walked, sheltered by the bushes, there was a shadowy hush. As the path curved, she saw ahead of her a rabbit bunched up motionless, and in front of the rabbit, a heap of coils, a snake's swaying head.

Her first impulse was to stop and raise her pistol. It would be easy to shoot the snake's head off, though it was a harmless variety, and there were too many snakes to save all the rabbits. She stamped on the stones, clapped her hands, and cried, "Get away—go!"

The snake lowered its head and rippled out of sight. The rabbit came out of its daze, and bolted into the azalea hedge. The face of one of Silas's helpers popped up over the bushes. Brandishing a hoe, he asked her what was the matter. She told the boy, and he disappeared too. If she had known he was close by, to dispose of the snake for her, she would have shot it, probably because her pent-up anger urged her to strike out at something. She knew she must keep cool when she was dealing with someone as devious as Baring. As soon as Luke heard what she had to tell him, he would fling Baring off the plantation.

Aunt Dora had just finished taking in her wash. She and her cat were coming around the corner of the cabin. Pink China roses bloomed on bushes in her little yard, dark red roses bloomed on the vines climbing at the end of the cabin porch. It wasn't time to go back to the house yet, Missy said, thinking it would be pleasant to sit out on the porch. The sun had gone under the clouds, and Aunt Dora decided the air was too dampish, and made her come inside.

The heavy wooden shutters were already firmly closed against nighttime. Aunt Dora shut the door, bolted it, and put a chunk of wood on the fire, then another, relieving the darkness, though the flames made the room much too hot. Missy sat down in the little rocking chair she had used when she had been a child, and had always kept here. She thought of all the times she and Roy had been in this room, half suffocated from the heat of the fire, the fumes from Aunt Dora's pipe, the cloud of steam from the kettle, and the smoke rising from the skillet where salt meat was sizzling.

The room was scrubbed clean, as it always was. The big bed took up most of the floor space. Aunt Dora hadn't let lap chillun or yard chillun sleep in it. Maybe she didn't sleep in it herself. Her pillows, her feather bed, puffed up to plumpness, and her pride of bright quilts had a look of being permanently molded to the perfection you always saw. Missy remembered how when she and Roy were at last shooed out, they had leaped across the road on the steppingstones, had gone running through the dusky garden, with Roy behind her chanting, "How far's the way to Barney Bright?/Three score leagues and ten/Can I go and come by candlelight?/Yes, if your legs are long and light/But mind out the ole witch don't catch you." With the words "catch you" he would lunge forward and grab her.

Aunt Dora lighted her pipe; her rocking chair creaked back and forth. The cat curled up within reach of Missy's hand. All the submerged currents in the lives of the servants and the field hands sooner or later drifted to this room. If she chose, she could show Missy the whole pattern of the plantation, just as she pieced scraps of cloth into the elaborate design of her quilts, though she didn't always choose to divulge all she knew, or guessed.

"What do you make of this—" Missy began, and told her

Philip and his uncle had become enemies to each other, then went on to repeat what Mr. 'Bijah had said. When Missy had come into the room, she had carefully put her pistol on the mantelpiece, by the clock, where no one would touch it by accident, saying, "There—it's out of the way." Aunt Dora approved of her taking it with her everywhere she went, and while Missy talked, Aunt Dora's eyes every now and then found the glint of the mother-of-pearl handle.

"Dr. Baring is wild to have Mr. Philip go, and from the way it sounds, you'd think he deliberately drummed up a quarrel—tried to insult Mr. 'Bijah and Mr. Jack on purpose—" Not knowing her overseers would come straight to her. "Almost as if he wanted them to walk off, though it doesn't make sense!" She didn't expect to find an answer, but she found herself reassured by the swaying firelight, the stupefying heat and Aunt Dora's presence.

Aunt Dora didn't say anything for a few minutes, then startled Missy by agreeing it might be that Dr. Baring did want the overseers to go, depending on what was in his mind, what he was after. If you could see that, you could see how it might make pretty good sense to him. If he didn't want Mr. Philip around, it could be he didn't want Mr. 'Bijah and Mr. Jack around either. They had tongues in their heads.

"I don't see what that has to do with it. Aunt Agnes has a tongue in her head too. My stepfather hasn't hinted he'd like to see the last of her."

Veering away from the discussion of Baring, Aunt Dora talked to Missy about how everyone counted on her—Mr. Luke, the Doctor and Miss Lucie, all the servants, all the hands, and her old nurse.

"The best nurse in the world," Missy said. "But ever since I've had that little spell of sickness the other day you've been clucking like a broody hen, and never let me out of your sight."

"An' don't aim to—"

"I'm glad to have you stay with me at night, Aunt Do," Missy admitted. "But don't you worry about me any more."

Aunt Dora said she had prayed for a Sign, so she would see her way better, and at last the Sign had come. Her solemn, deep-toned voice sank to a whisper. Afraid of breaking the tenuous communication established between them, Missy didn't

ask questions, she waited until Aunt Dora chose her own way of telling. On that day in January, the day of Roy's death, Eli had been fishing in the river. He had walked along the bank, outside the levee, going toward Halcyon Landing, then had stopped to throw his line in the water. He hadn't been in a boat at all, he had been on the bank. From the description of the place, Missy knew where he had been. The wind had risen, and the fish, sensing the coming storm, had stayed in the deep water. Knowing they weren't going to bite, and seeing it was going to rain hard, Eli had turned back and had headed home. Later, he had found out what had happened on the river that day. Then, Dr. Baring and Mr. Philip had spread word about how it had happened.

"They—they said they didn't know, because they were in the woods."

Eli had heard what they said, and hadn't dared contradict them.

"When did you hear this?" Missy asked.

Aunt Dora couldn't remember just when. A few days ago, maybe a week. It had come to her little by little, a word here, a word there. Missy knew the system of communication. Doubts, whispers were slowly pervading the whole plantation, a low drumbeat, attuned to the ears meant to hear it, reaching her only because Aunt Dora had chosen to tell her, for some particular and important reason.

Missy was visualizing the river bank; near the boundary of Tanglewild, but outside the levee, the land looped out a little into the river. Eli must had been just about at that spot. Standing there, if he had been looking in the direction of Halcyon Landing, he would have been able to see part of the landing, the projecting bow of the cattle barge, and the inner curve of the point. "Tell me exactly what Eli is saying."

Nobody rightly understood what Eli was driving at. All it amounted to was that he had told his wife he didn't believe his eyes had fooled him, and he didn't believe Mr. Luke had been fooled either.

Eli might have seen the skiff—a dash of black silhouetted on the dark water. Then Eli had turned away. He hadn't seen what happened, but how could Luke have seen anything? He had been here with her through the storm. Later, when he had gone

to the river, and had dived, had he noticed something the other two men had either failed to observe or omitted to tell? Afterward, Luke had never talked about that day, had begged her not to talk about it. Echoing in her ears was the sound of his voice, saying to Philip, "Did you go in the river to try to look for him?" She had thought the question harsh, rather unfair, yet it wasn't in character for Luke to be unreasonable. Then why had he asked Philip?

"I'll talk to Eli—I'll find out what he means."

Tears filled her eyes. Aunt Dora wiped them away with a corner of her apron. "Don't cry, chile." She tried to check her own, but a few of them trickled down her face, following the furrows other tears had made.

She warned Missy not to let her stepfather guess she knew anything. Just play possum. Leave everything to Mr. Luke. He would attend to it when he came.

"Why did you tell me anything about what Eli's been saying?" Missy asked.

"So's you'd look sharp."

"You and I have never liked Dr. Baring," Missy said. "Now Mr. 'Bijah and Mr. Jack have no use for him, yet all of you seem to be afraid of him. What can he do? Who owns Cibola and Tanglewild?"

"You. Watch out fo' yo'self, chile, an' keep an eye on him."

Aunt Dora lighted her pipe. Smoke eddied up from it. After a time, she asked Missy if Baring wanted her to marry Luke.

"He has tried to put a good face on it, but it's the last thing he wants. The other day, I told him he would have to get out when I married. He and Mr. Philip will both have to go, but they don't like it." In the meantime, she added, she would watch her stepfather carefully.

Her recent conversation with Philip recurred to her.

"I wouldn't listen to you, Aunt Do, when you told me Dr. Baring and Mr. Philip were cut out of the same pattern. I was too vain. I wanted to think he cared about me. He was hoping to marry me to get Cibola."

She had done him too much credit when she had assumed that Roy's death had affected him deeply. He was not grief-stricken, he was thwarted.

"At first, Dr. Baring tried to make a match, but since they've quarreled, he doesn't want me to marry Mr. Philip either."

Aunt Dora said she didn't think he wanted Missy to marry anybody. If anything happened to her, who would get all the land, and all the cotton, worth so much money? Miss Juliette. Wouldn't Dr. Baring feel it would be just about the same thing as getting it himself?

"It would be—"

He couldn't get his hands on the capital which was the source of her mother's income, but Cibola and Tanglewild were a very different matter, for her mother couldn't possibly run the plantations. Her husband would take complete control. Missy resolved to write to her lawyers at once, to ask if she, as a minor, could make a valid will. She knew Baring didn't have any deep feeling for the land itself, or any sense of responsibility for the people living on it. All he wanted was money.

"I hope and pray I live long enough to keep my stepfather from ever getting his clutches on anything that belonged to my own father!"

Aunt Dora said she prayed the Lord Missy would live out her days, and that she herself would live long enough to be nurse to the children Missy and Mr. Luke would have by and by, but what was worrying her now was the way Missy had been taken sick after those doses of the tonic Dr. Baring had fixed for her.

"Rosie had the same kind of sickness and pain. It was just something that struck both of us. She had a milder case of it than I did."

Aunt Dora had an answer to that argument. Rosie had confessed to her grandmother how she had sniffed at the tonic, thinking it smelled like wine and spices and molasses, so she had decided it must be good to taste, and had taken a dose herself. She had felt pains and had been sick all during that night. The next morning she had been ailing still, but improving. She had never been as bad off as Missy because she had taken only the one dose. Missy had swallowed four heaping tablespoonfuls of tonic.

"I don't see what could have been wrong with it—" Missy began, yet she remembered Philip's hint. He had advised her not to take any more of his uncle's prescriptions, and though she could ignore Philip's warning, only two people on all the

acres of Cibola, Tanglewild, and Halcyon had been seized with retching nausea, cramps, and jagged pains. Nobody else had taken Arnold Baring's mixture. Rosie, who had taken a single dose, had been only slightly affected. Missy had taken four times as much of it, and had been deathly ill.

"He said it was Dr. Frank's tonic, made to taste better."

To taste different, Aunt Dora murmured. Many a time Dr. Frank had called her to come nurse sick folks. Many a time she had watched him mixing his medicines. She knew how to mix that tonic herself. He had showed her how to measure everything he put in it. He had explained to her that there was poison in it, just a few drops. Arsenic, he called it. Once, when he was making up the tonic, he had put in one drop of arsenic too many, and had thrown it all out. A drop or so was good. It fattened folks up and gave them a good color, but even a little too much would make them sick. That's why Dr. Frank was always so particular about how he used it. Anyone who took enough of it, would not only get sick, but would die. There were things to give, to keep the poison from working, but they had to be given quickly, or it would be too late. That kind of poison had a bitter taste to it. Had the tonic been bitter under the sweet?

Missy remembered it had clawed her throat after she had swallowed it. "Yes, but nearly all medicines are bitter."

It would have been easy for Dr. Baring if he had wanted to put in plenty of the poison, Aunt Dora pointed out. If anything had happened to Missy, who could have said for sure just what had ailed her?

"Why do you think of that particular poison?" Missy asked.

There were other kinds, Aunt Dora said, but they weren't as easy to give. They worked faster, some of them, so fast that people became too suspicious about a death from any of those. Or left too many signs after death. They didn't act like an ordinary stomach trouble.

This was all a rigmarole, Missy tried to tell herself. "What you are saying is—you mean—there was arsenic in the tonic, enough to kill me and, if you hadn't guessed it, and given me the right things, I would have died."

She remembered she had swallowed quantities of milk, raw eggs, and sweet oil. Uncle Frank had given Aunt Dora books

to read on medicines. Missy had often heard him talking over his cases with Aunt Dora, the symptoms of various illnesses, and the drugs he had used, and he had often asked her to nurse his patients. When he had discussed poisons, he would certainly have told her what antidotes to use, and given her explicit instructions.

"We may be making all this up about him," Missy sighed. "He didn't start trouble on the levee before he gave me the tonic, but afterward, when he knew I was much better and was going to get well."

She remembered Aunt Dora's air of pessimism when she had answered Baring's questions. She had wanted to keep him from knowing how far recovery had progressed. This morning, he had not been able to hide his anger when he had found out his medicines had been discarded.

Aunt Dora looked grim. She said Dr. Baring had not picked a fight with Mr. 'Bijah and Mr. Jack without some reason, and she could guess what it was. Missy was able to be up and out, able to speak up for herself, able to say she had taken Dr. Baring's tonic. Before he hadn't worried about the overseers. They were on the levee. They didn't see what was going on in the house, but once they heard about Missy swallowing the tonic, and they were sure to hear, then if she took sick again, or if anything happened to her, any kind of accident, they would prick up their ears. So would Mr. Philip.

"I believe he already has—"

Aunt Dora said Dr. Baring was trying to make the overseers leave the plantations, before he tried anything else.

"They have no notion of walking off, and he hasn't much time to try anything. Mr. Philip's leaving, but Mr. Luke will soon be here, and Dr. Frank."

Aunt Dora shook her head. They hadn't come yet, and the overseers weren't in the house. If anything bad happened to Missy, Mr. 'Bijah and Mr. Jack would do plenty of talking, and might do harm to Dr. Baring, but it would be too late to help her. There was no telling what chances Dr. Baring might take, or what he might have in his mind.

If he had decided on some plan to eliminate her, Missy thought, it would have to be done quickly, before Luke and the Ardens came back. He would see he couldn't afford to wait.

How much did he want Cibola, Tanglewild and all the rest? How far was he prepared to go?

Missy put her hand on Aunt Dora's. "If you hadn't been here to take care of me—"

"The Lord was watchin' over you, chile."

Through the unwinding blue gauze of smoke, Aunt Dora's eyes glinting in the firelight and her earth-dark face had an idol's calm and power. Missy felt an icy prickling along her spine, an intensification of the shudder children call "someone walking on my grave." She gave up trying to be logical, or civilized, and yielded to the voice of primitive instinct. Fear woke, and an alertness to a sense of danger.

She suddenly remembered the nightmare she'd had just before she had waked up this morning, and told Aunt Dora the whole dream, which ended with the dark, tall, cloaked figure, waiting in the center of the maze.

"Who do you think I saw, Aunt Do?" Missy asked idly.

There was silence in the room except for the cat's sleepy purring, and the silky-sounding flutter of the flames on the hearth. At last, Aunt Dora said, "Ole man Death."

Chapter Twenty-One

Clouds had gathered, and before sundown, the evening had turned dark. Little Joe went running through the garden, in a wild hurry to get Aunt Dora, Missy, and himself back to the big house before the dimming light faded. He pounded on his grandmother's door, calling to her to please come on with Missy. He had to wait while she smothered her fire, put on her shawl. When she came out, with Missy and the cat, Little Joe begged her to move as fast as she could. Holding the lantern he had already lighted in a shaking hand, he urged his grandmother and Missy through the garden, and panted out the story he had heard from one of the hands, who had just come back from the levee.

A half hour or so earlier, Mr. Jack Bolton, after he had eaten his supper, had been riding back to the levee, by himself. Instead of going by the road, he had taken a short cut through the trees. Without a warning sound, a big black panther—black as tar and with eyes like live coals—had sprung from a branch, dropping right down on Mr. Jack, but had missed him and landed on the horse instead. The horse had screamed and plunged, and had flung off the panther, though the long sharp claws had raked and torn the horse's hindquarters.

Mr. Jack had not been touched, Missy realized, and the horse's wounds would heal. Mr. Jack hadn't had the chance to shoot, Little Joe said, glancing over his shoulder. Beyond the limited circle of light flung by his erratically swinging lantern, the twilight deepened.

"He got clean away," Little Joe murmured. His voice gave the impression of the panther's cunning and boldness, attacking in broad daylight, when people were close by. The path Mr. Jack had taken wasn't close to the levee all the way, Missy pointed out, and though the panther had attacked him in daylight, it was shadowy among those heavy trees. Little Joe said it was dark right here in the garden; wolves and bears were prowling, and there were plenty of trees. In any one of them, a panther might be lying on a branch, watching, and ready to spring. He would be glad to be safe in the house.

Going up the steps, Missy wondered if it wasn't safer for her outside than in. This evening, she couldn't bring herself to sit at the table with the others, or struggle to make polite conversation with them, keeping her own secrets, and trying to guess what the people under her own roof were hiding from her. She sent word to her aunt not to expect her downstairs. In a few minutes, Agnes rapped at the door. Missy opened it.

"Why aren't you coming down, Miranda?" Agnes demanded. "Is anything wrong with you?"

"I'm all right, Aunt Agnes, but I'm tired. I'll have a hot bath, and if my tea is sent up to my sitting room, I won't need to get dressed again. I have some letters to write, then I'll go to bed early," Missy explained. She invited Agnes to come in, and asked her if her headache was better.

"A little, not much," Agnes answered. "No, I can't come in. Tea's late already—since the plantation bell doesn't ring three

times a day, everybody in this house seems to have lost all sense of time. If you don't feel like making the effort to come down, I'll have to be at the table, I suppose."

Her tone was sacrificial, but she had not put on a silk dress and her jet earrings to sit upstairs. The earrings swung back and forth, the little jet knobs fringing them clacked together. She held a small black fan and, while she talked, flicked it open and shut. "I'll tell you good night, then—I hope you sleep well, Miranda." She hurried off, and seemed as anxious to go as Missy was to be free of her presence. Aunt Agnes would enjoy presiding at the head of the table as mistress of the house.

Rosie brought in a heavily laden tray, and hovered over Missy, urging her to eat. This food was safe, Missy thought, since it had come straight from the kitchen. Was she afraid to eat at her own table, in her own house? As if her stepfather could poison the dishes. Nonsense! Maybe it was all nonsense, a weaving of nerves, imagination, and surmises, and yet, it might be real, and though she didn't intend to barricade herself in her room, cowering in terror of Arnold Baring, she had to face the possibility—even the probability—that he could be plotting against her.

She sat down at her desk, and began a letter to her lawyer, asking him if she could make her will. Rosie picked up the tray, to take it down the back steps. When she reached the open bedroom door, she paused to gossip a little with her grandmother, who was sitting in the lamplight, reading her Bible. The servants' footsteps and voices came from the gallery below.

Then came a yell, and an answering shriek from Rosie. Missy ran out on the gallery, thinking the levee must have broken. As soon as she looked, she saw the cause of the excitement—a brilliant ball of light, bouncing along the ground.

"It's nothing to be afraid of," she called down. "It's just swamp fire, from the damp." She had seen it before, often, but never as large, bright, and persistent. Even though she knew it was created out of ooze, water, and wood, there was something eerie about its flame without heat, its wild shine in the night. The servants recognized it for what it was, but its sudden flaring, its rippling tail like a fiery snake seemed ominous.

Missy and Aunt Dora watched the dazzle swirl off, bob like a ghostly lantern through the trees, flickering, then vanishing. When the glare had faded away, the moonless night had a heavier

darkness than before. Downstairs, Isaiah herded the other servants into the house. Doors closed, keys turned in locks. Upstairs, Aunt Dora went from window to window, making sure the shutters were fastened, bolting the doors leading onto the gallery, and all doors connecting to Missy's rooms. No one, no one at all could come stealthily creeping in.

Missy sat down at her desk again, thinking over what to write to her lawyer. What would Mr. Barnes's sober, methodical mind make of a tangle of fears, suspicions, and surmises? Perhaps she should confine her letter to the one question: Could she or couldn't she make a valid will? After she had finished her question, she wrote down the provisions she wanted put in her will. Perhaps a clear statement of her wishes and intentions might have some legal value. She paused, looking down at the paper. If she put down the story of the tonic and her illness, and her reasons for thinking her stepfather had attempted to poison her with arsenic, then if anything should happen to her in the next few days, her lawyers might be able to cast doubt on Arnold Baring's character.

If her stepfather could manage to bring about her death, success might make him bold enough to plan to rid himself of her mother too. The very possibility of some future danger to her mother nerved Missy to put the events of these last months on paper. Her pen moved on, filling one page after another. Reading over what she had written, she decided that even if her evidence was flimsy and her suspicions fantastic she had expressed herself calmly.

She folded her letter, lighted a candle, melted the end of a stick of red sealing wax, affixed it to the paper, stamped it with her seal, and took the letter to Aunt Dora.

"Please tell one of the boys to be sure to take it to the landing in time to put it on the downriver packet."

Aunt Dora took charge of the letter; it would go on the steamboat headed for New Orleans, due sometime tomorrow, maybe in the morning. The *Lambert* would be along too, but it was bound upriver.

Though the weather was unusually warm, Aunt Dora had insisted on lighting a fire against the dampness, and had drawn up a rocking chair close to the flames. Instead of her tignon, she was wearing a big white nightcap and had put on a massive

flannel nightgown, with a dark shawl folded over her shoulders. Her cat was asleep on the hearth rug. Lately, she shut him up after dark. This evening, Missy suggested bringing him upstairs. He was undisputed lord over all the other cats, and the dogs let him alone, but he was no match for the wild animals prowling through these nights.

Aunt Dora closed her Bible and put it on the table. Leaving her chair, she moved through the rooms, turning out the lamps, snuffing out the candles, and adjusting the wick of the night lamp, always kept burning until daylight. She tucked Missy in bed, told her to get a good rest, settled down in her own bed at the foot of the big four-poster and was soon breathing evenly. Missy stayed awake, tense and alert, wondering how long the men could hold the levee against the pressure of the flood, wondering if the plantation bell would start clanging the alarm before morning.

Outside, the wind rose in restless gusts, and ebbed in whisperings and long sighings. Over the wet ground, across the spreading water, swamp fire flickered, flaring for a sudden moment on one of the secrets the night held. There were intervals when the wind died away. During one of these lulls, Missy didn't hear a sound, either indoors or out. Suddenly a wild tormented crying made her start up. For a moment, she was afraid someone was wandering lost out there in the black night. Then she realized it was a marauding panther, in the garden, uncomfortably near the house.

The panther's cries stopped, leaving a profound silence. The dogs didn't whine to get free and start on a hunt. The foxes were not barking. In the room, the cat was hunched in a fur ball. All the animals, wild and domesticated, had taken warning. Easing herself out of bed, Missy went to the window, pushed it up, and yielded to the temptation of unfastening the shutter. Before she swung it open, she took the precaution of putting out the little lamp burning on the table by her bed. With one side of the shutter ajar, the wind cooled her face. It would be pleasant to go out on the gallery for a few minutes. She would not venture on the outside gallery; it ran all the way around the house, and had access to the back steps, but the inner gallery opened on the court, and ended at a door leading to the upstairs hall, a heavy bolted door.

She closed the shutter, fastened it, put on her dark silk dressing gown, and her slippers, eyed Aunt Dora, who was sleeping, and tiptoed across the room. The key turned easily in the well-oiled lock. Missy opened the door just enough to let herself through, and shut it warily behind her. Suddenly she burned with anger. Why should she have to be so careful in her own house? Her taut nerves answered for her. She realized her hands were clenched tight. Deliberately, she forced her body to relax. It was sensible to take precautions, and avoid risks, but she refused to be afraid.

Standing in the shadows made by the oak growing in the court between her wing and her aunt's, Missy soon grew used to the dark. The wing opposite hers took shape, showing her black oblongs of shuttered windows and pale columns, partly veiled by leaves and branches. The tree was rustling a little, but her quick, country-trained ears caught a faint, but different sound. It had not come from wind, tree, or animal. She knew she had heard the click of a door closing, her aunt's door. The wind rose again, obscuring other sounds, but swinging the branches aside, giving Missy a view of the gallery across the court. Something was moving along the gallery—moving toward the door leading to the upstairs hall.

Not something—someone. Who could come out of that door but Aunt Agnes? Where was she going after midnight? Missy stood still, watching. The moment came when the person out there had to open the door to the hall, where a lamp was kept burning all night long. Missy saw the door open, making no sound she could catch, but letting out a thread of light. The door opened wider and a figure showed dark against the dull yellow glow, but distinctly silhouetted. Missy saw the full sweep of a dark robe, a shawl-covered head, and the pallor of an outstretched hand. The hand proved it was Aunt Agnes.

Missy ran to the door on her side, slipped the bolt, and, gently turning the knob, opened it only a crack, taking care to keep well out of the light herself. Agnes was hurrying through the hall. Her head was bent, she was holding her black shawl over the lower part of her face, heightening the impression she gave of fearfulness and furtiveness. She halted at Arnold Baring's room, and tapped at his door. It opened a few inches, the top part of his face peered around the edge of it. He rumbled something

in his throat. Agnes pushed her way in, her arms lifted. There was an instant when he seemed about to thrust her away, but he let her in, and shut the door.

Missy softly closed the door she had been looking through, shot the bolt, went running back to her own room, and let herself in. Everything was just as she had left it. Aunt Dora was snoring gently; the cat, curled on the foot of her bed, opened a yellow eye as Missy flung herself in her own bed. Her face burned. She buried her head in her pillow, trying to escape what she had seen, wishing she had never watched, never, never found out. Nothing would have made her suspect, much less believe—if she had not seen for herself.

Yet—wasn't this also part of the pattern? Arnold Baring must have used Aunt Agnes's jealousy and vanity to decoy her, befuddling her, so she would be blind to his real aims. Even if she did begin to understand he was not interested in her, but in Cibola, she would not turn against him—not openly.

Glances, words, little incidents flashed across Missy's mind. Her aunt was complaining about the stores filling the rooms between hers and the hall, because she could no longer get through that way to reach Arnold Baring's room. Her usual path was blocked, and she had not dared go by the outside gallery. She would have had to pass by Philip's windows. She had chosen the lesser risk—the inner gallery, counting on the tree to hide her, counting on Missy to be asleep behind drawn shutters.

Roy's death had not given Aunt Agnes her witch-sharp face and overwrought nerves. She at least must feel a sense of guilt. Obviously, she was frightened—desperately afraid of being found out, and perhaps she was learning to be afraid of Baring himself.

As the shock of her discovery began to subside a little, Missy tried to think. The most important thing was to keep her mother from making the same discovery. Not a hint, not a whisper must ever reach her. Baring was dangerous, and she would have to be protected from him, if possible, without an open scandal. This other scandal, involving her own sister, must be hushed up, hidden even from Luke, from the Ardens, from everyone.

If the truth about Agnes was going to stay a secret, Missy realized she was the one who would have to bury it in the

shadows. Let her aunt go on living here in the house, and prevent her from doing any more harm. Missy realized she would have to create a surface of harmony, of civility. She asked herself if she could go through with it, day in and day out. She had to, for her mother's sake.

Exhausted, but with her mind made up, she fell asleep until Rosie came with the early morning coffee. The cat streaked out. Aunt Dora was up and stirring, going from window to window, flinging open the shutters. Still drowsy, Missy found relish in the beginnings of the day's routine until she remembered last night.

Missy sent word to Little Joe to tell her when Dr. Baring came downstairs. There was no danger of his leaving the house before he ate his breakfast. "And please have one of the stable-boys saddle a horse for Dr. Baring."

Dressing quickly, she went on to the outside gallery to wait. Sunlight, still ruddy, glittered on the lake. The morning painted every flower and leaf in dazzling fresh colors. During the night, the backwater had stretched forward on the fields, coiling out of the flood-gorged swamp. The water was flickering and shining in the light, but it was an ominous sign.

Aunt Dora had followed Missy, and was standing beside her on the gallery, listening and watching when Little Joe came to say Dr. Baring was going into the dining room now. Missy asked if her aunt was at the table. Little Joe said Miss Agnes was going to have her breakfast upstairs. Sadie was fixing a tray for her. The news from the levee was the same. It was still holding, and no more sandboils had developed during the night.

When he had gone, Aunt Dora asked Missy what she was going to do about her stepfather.

"Get rid of him. Don't tell me to wait, Aunt Do—I can't."

Aunt Dora didn't argue. She warned Missy not to shut herself up anywhere with her stepfather, or to be anywhere outdoors with him, but to stay in the house, with the doors open. Isaiah and the other servants would be within call, if she wanted them.

"I'll meet him in the hall, and talk to him there."

Missy went along the gallery, went into the main part of the house, and ran down the curving stairway to the hall below. As soon as she was out of sight, Aunt Dora called for Little Joe,

and gave orders. He and Isaiah must watch Dr. Baring, keep a sharp watch. Without waiting to answer questions, she followed Missy herself. There was no landing on the stairs, but halfway down the steps, she halted. Looking over the banisters, she had a view of the hall, and glimpses of some of the rooms on the lower floor, including the dining room.

Missy looked in the dining room, and saw her stepfather sitting at the table. He was alone, except for the servants coming back and forth, waiting on him. He was preoccupied with his food. Even if he had been more observant, he could not have seen her, as she kept out of his range of vision. She sat down in one of the stiff, tall-backed chairs against the wall, near the dining room, to intercept him when he came out. Catching an inadvertent glimpse of herself in the pier-table mirror, she realized she looked childish and unimpressive. It would never occur to her stepfather to be afraid of her until she convinced him she had power, and was fully prepared to use it. With the doors and windows open, and the servants hovering near, she had no reason to be physically afraid of him. He might be plotting to kill her, but he would never dare anything overt. What she wanted to avoid was an unpleasant scene with him.

He was getting up from the table, he was coming out. She moved to the door, placing herself directly in his way. To escape her, he would have to retreat to the dining room. She reminded herself he would not think of escaping or retreating. He looked startled to see her standing in front of him, but managed to say good morning.

Missy had no words to waste. "A horse is saddled and waiting for you, sir. The *City of St. Louis* is due sometime today. Please go to the landing and wait for the boat. I'll have your things packed and sent in time to be put on board."

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"I'm asking you to leave this house, leave Cibola—now."

"Leave? I'm not thinking of going anywhere! Why should I?"

"Because I won't have you under my roof, or on my land any longer."

"Now see here—none of this makes sense—" He clung to a brisk heartiness, like someone trying to soothe a child, but his paunch heaved with his heavy breathing. "You've been ill, you're

not yourself, you're on the brink of a hysterical seizure and should lie down and be quiet."

"You understand me, Dr. Baring," she said. "I have strong reasons for asking you to leave at once. You know what my reasons are."

Baring forced his mouth to stretch into a grimace meant to be a smile, "grinning like a mule eating briers," she thought, realizing he was going to make as much trouble as he could.

"And suppose I tell you I don't intend to go? My dear girl, you can't be expected to know anything about the laws of this state, but let me remind you that you are not of age. You have no legal right to order me off!"

"I know the law in this part of the state, and so do you. Let me remind you of the Carew case."

Young Carew's mother had been ill-treated by her second husband. Her son had shot his stepfather dead. The law had not interfered. It was a "family matter." Public opinion too had decided the shooting was justified.

"If you think you can threaten me, young woman!" Baring's face had turned a rusty orange color, looming raw and bloated.

"Will you please lower your voice, sir? The servants can hear you. I've found out what has been going on in my house, and I'm ordering you out of it. Of course my mother can't have anything more to do with you."

"Do you think you can come between man and wife?" he blustered.

"I can, and I will. Either you will go away, stay away, agree to a legal separation—in whatever form my mother's lawyers advise—or Uncle Frank and Luke will have to know the truth about you, including what I saw last night."

"You didn't see—" Baring struggled for words he couldn't find.

"I don't want a scandal," she said. "And I'm sure you see what a risk you run. I would rather not have you thrown off the place by force, but unless you leave of your own accord, and leave now, I will have to have you thrown off."

Baring gulped, but didn't speak.

"You had much better take the chance I'm giving you to go quietly, before Luke comes."

For a minute or more, Baring made no move. Missy stepped

aside, to let him pass, and waited. He hesitated, wavered, gave ground, and clumped slowly down the hall.

Catching sight of Isaiah's face peering around the edge of the dining-room door, Missy said, "Please tell the boys to pack Dr. Baring's bags right away, and get them to the landing. Dr. Baring has to catch the boat."

Her stepfather heard her, and halted. Turning around again, he eyed her. Sunlight streaming in showed her his ponderous bulk and his wide, heavy jowled face, stained with a mottled flush.

"Ask Philip where he was at the time of the—accident."

Missy watched him go out of the back door, cross the gallery, and disappear out of sight. She heard him stomping down the steps, heard horse's hoofs crunching on the gravel drive. The faint sound faded, was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Aunt Dora had been leaning far over the banisters to see the last of him. Straightening up, she climbed the stairs to the second floor. Agnes was standing in the hall, near the head of the steps, where the light from a window fell on her. Aunt Dora took in all the details of Agnes's lace cap, and of her morning robe, white cambric, finely tucked and embroidered, with lace-edged flounces and beading run with black velvet ribbons. She noticed the expression on Agnes's face, and her hands, gripping the banister rail. As she didn't get an answer or even a glance in response to her "'Mawnin', Miss Agnes," Aunt Dora went on her way, thinking her own thoughts.

Isaiah came out in the hall to say that Little Joe, Gus, and Gnat were packing fast; the wagon was coming along to haul Dr. Baring's baggage to the landing in plenty of time to catch the *City of St. Louis*, and urged Missy to come and eat the good hot breakfast he had ready for her. To please him, she went into the dining room and sat down at the head of the table, her

own table. All traces of her stepfather's presence had been cleared away. She had not expected to be able to swallow a mouthful. All she wanted was some strong coffee, but after Isaiah had persuaded her to taste the steaming hot grits and broiled ham, and take a biscuit right out of the oven, she admitted she was hungry. After an almost sleepless night, food revived her. The encounter she had dreaded was behind her, and she had triumphed.

Though the plantation bell had not begun to ring the alarm to tell them the levee had broken, a sudden hubbub broke out among the servants. Missy went out on the back gallery to see what was causing the excitement. One of the hands, coming from the levee, had told Silas the news, and Silas had come to the house to repeat it. Halcyon's overseer, Sam Jenkins, with one of the hands, had gone in a rowboat to bring in three men from the flooded point. As Halcyon Point was beyond the levee, all of it had been under water for weeks. Some trappers and fishermen lived there, in shacks built high on stilts. All of them had come in, to take shelter behind the plantation levees, except these three.

The overseer knew they were there and, as the water on the point was deepening fast for them to be safe, he had momentarily expected to see them come in. As they did not appear, he had gone out to see what had happened to them. He had left yesterday, some time after dinner, and had not come back yet. At sunup this morning, Mr. Jack Bolton, with two of Halcyon's men, had set out in a rowboat to search the point.

Hiding her own anxiety, Missy quieted the servants, and tried to reassure them, though she admitted the dangers of rowing in flooded land, particularly in those heavy woods, where submerged stumps and roots might tear a hole in the boat. If that had happened, there were plenty of trees within the men's reach. They could seize the nearest branch, climb up, and hang on until the searchers found them. Little Joe murmured they would all die from snakebite. She acknowledged to herself there was that danger, if any of the men encountered the poisonous moccasins.

"They'll watch out for cottonmouths," she said, thinking of the men trying to maintain a precarious hold on a branch all night—if they were still alive. "When they couldn't see them,

they could smell them," she added. "Most of the snakes are harmless."

Little Joe muttered the trees would be full of panthers.

"Nonsense, don't you know wolves and bears and panthers have all run away from the point long ago? The water's too deep."

The servants went off to their work, leaving Missy to imagine what disasters could have overtaken the men. Even in daylight, it would not be easy to find them in the woods—if they had been able to take refuge in the trees. Halcyon Point had somber associations for her. An hour or so later Mr. 'Bijah came to the house with good news. Halycon's overseer, the man he had taken with him, and the men he had gone to rescue had been found, and were now safe at Halcyon. Jack Bolton was back on Tanglewild's levee.

"When he started out lookin', Bolton was pullin' a mighty long face, and groanin' po' Jenkins and the man what he took with him was lost, and we'd never see hair nor hide of 'em no mo'. Like I tolt him, they'd make out 'til he could locate 'em and fotch 'em back."

"Mr. Jack does look on the dark side, but so did I," Missy said. "They were lucky."

"Yes'm, I reckon so. Sam Jenkins got them folks outta that lean-to of their'n in the nick of time—"

The water had climbed to the shack, and the men were getting ready to swim to the nearest tree when Jenkins had reached them, and had taken them in his boat. Rowing back, his skiff had become entangled on a sapling hidden below the surface, and had sprung a leak. All of the men were good swimmers, and used to the woods. They had made for a tree tall enough to have branches well above the flood, and had waited for someone to come along and rescue them. They had been wet, cold, tired, hungry, and plagued by mosquitoes. Their discomforts had been endurable, but perched in their precarious roost all night, they must have been haunted by their awareness of their real danger. Suppose the searching party had not been able to find them?

"The people who live out on the point in those shacks all have some kind of skiff. Why didn't those three men get in

their own boat and row themselves in?" Missy asked. "Why did they wait so long?"

"When they went to git in their skiff, it had done bus' loose and floated off. I reckon they had it tied with some ole rotten piece of rope. Feckless."

Missy thanked Mr. 'Bijah for letting her know they were all safe.

Mr. 'Bijah said flood crest was due to reach here sometime soon, maybe tomorrow. The men would keep on building up the levee to meet it, and he had better get on back to keep his eye on the work. He left Missy thinking over the tasks ahead of her and the responsibilities weighing on her. A feckless, haphazard existence, unburdened by possessions, had advantages.

On her way to the storerooms to get blankets and medicines for the Indians encamped on the levee, she came face to face with her aunt, and spoke to her. Agnes asked if there was any news of Halcyon's overseer and the other men. Missy told her everything Mr. 'Bijah had just reported. While she was talking she heard the steamboat blowing for Tanglewild Landing. Her aunt must have heard it too, but neither of them made any comment.

Missy had already told the servants what to do if they heard the plantation bell. On Tanglewild, Hettie was ensconced in the house, with her family and old Job and his wife to keep her company. She had already sent word to Missy not to be uneasy. The house was stocked with enough food, firewood, and supplies to see them through a flood. One skiff was tied to the railing of the front steps, and two more were tied by the back steps. If the levee broke, her boys would row over to Cibola every day or so to tell Missy what was going on at Tanglewild.

All cattle, and all the other livestock had been sent away from Tanglewild. The overseer had only kept his own horse, and the mules he needed for the levee work. The few he had could be led up the ramps to the reinforced lofts of barn and stables. He had stored hay and fodder in the old barn. If the levee broke, Tanglewild would go under water, stay under water for weeks. The mules would be sent by raft to higher ground until plowing and planting could begin.

Though Missy didn't expect the flood to reach Cibola's barns and stables, she had ordered ramps built here also, rather than

run the risk of losing valuable horses, mules, and the two remaining cows. After dinner, Missy "rode the place" to see how far the backwater had come up on the fields, paid visits to the gin, the barns, and stables to make sure everything was arranged to take care of people and animals, then cut across to the quarters. As the levee had never broken near Cibola, or been in as much danger of breaking, and the river had never risen so high before, they hardly knew what to expect. They listened for the plantation bell to ring, and exchanged gloomy predictions.

Missy gathered them in a group around her. Standing on the church steps, she told them she didn't think all of Cibola would be flooded if the levee broke, though Tanglewild would be under water. Over here, the overseers didn't expect the water to rise high enough to come into the cabins, it might not reach the quarters at all, though nobody could be sure yet. If the plantation bell began to ring, everybody must go to the gin, and stay there until they were sure the flood was not going to rise any higher on Cibola. As Jim had only one leg, and Lucinda was too feeble to move fast, Missy had ordered the cart to take them to the gin today, before sundown. If anyone else felt uneasy about staying in the quarters, they could go on to the gin.

She appointed Hiram's father to take charge in the quarters, and to herd all the people here to the gin. Of course they could take anything they wanted with them, including their dogs and cats. She promised her hearers they would not have to take refuge in the trees, or cling to their cabin rooftops. All they had to do was to go to the gin, where they would be safe, dry, and have plenty to eat. After she had finished her talk, and had answered all the questions, the whole group had become much more cheerful. The children were beaming, delighted with the idea of a new adventure.

By the time Missy left the quarters, it was almost sundown, too late to ride to the levee and back before dark. Even in broad daylight, with the hands and the wagons constantly coming and going to and from the levee, she intended to take Hiram with her, since she had promised Luke not to wander far alone. When she had given him her word, neither of them had been able to foresee any specific danger. She thought of the morning,

only last summer, when she had watched the *Eclipse* drawing away from Tanglewild Landing. She had followed the road leading from the levee around the lower end of the lake, had loitered on the bridge spanning the marshy stretch of ground, enjoying the shade from the thick trees growing beside the bridge, and she had been unaware of Luke's existence. Since then, everything had changed. She had grown years older in less than a year's time, and so had Luke, but they had grown together.

"Let's go back, Bess." Missy turned her mare toward the house.

Someone came galloping up behind her and caught up with her. It was Philip, on his way back from the levee. Missy did not want his company, but as he seemed to be trying to make himself useful, she could hardly refuse to let him ride to the house with her. She told him she sympathized with him for putting in a long day on the levee.

"I see you've risen from your sickbed to meet the crisis," he said. "Maybe the levee'll hold after all."

"I wouldn't bet a picayune on it."

She looked out on the fields, where the backwater was spreading its unnatural shadow. With her riding whip, she pointed out the stag and the doe bounding toward the lake. "They aren't betting on it either. They'll swim the lake, and try to swim the river to get to higher ground."

Philip looked, then turned a little in the saddle to study her face. "Instinct must have advised Uncle Arnold to take to his heels like the deer. We didn't exchange good-by, but I saw him slinking aboard the steamboat with all of his paraphernalia. He can't be on his way to Natchez to see your mother, not on a packet bound upriver. His exit had an air of finality."

"I don't know where he's going," Missy answered shortly.

"But you know why—"

The brilliance of Philip's gaze reminded her of the snake she had seen charming the rabbit.

"And so do I," he persisted. "Only one reason would make him go. You found out enough to frighten him off."

Philip's tone and look stressed his meaning.

It was obvious to Missy that he had been aware of the intrigue going on in her house, and had been aware of it for a long time. She suspected his discoveries had not been as inadvertent as hers.

His manner suggested he had pursued a trail to unearth evidence against his enemy. Remembering the hints Philip had flung out to puzzle her, she realized he must have made his knowledge plain to his uncle. Why? To try to put an end to the affair? No, if he was ashamed of it, Philip would never make allusions to her. He was taking a sly satisfaction in his own acumen. She felt sure Philip hadn't been able to resist boasting of it to his uncle.

Philip had ferreted out a secret, and had gained power over his uncle. Philip had brandished his power in Baring's face. Of course he had! He wanted to make Baring afraid of him, and Baring had been afraid of him. That explained why he had been so anxious for her to turn Philip out of the house.

"Think how many miles there are now between Uncle Arnold and Cibola!" Philip exulted.

The contrast between his wary caution as long as Baring had been on the scene and his triumphant gloating now jarred on Missy's nerves. Could Philip have had some reason for being afraid of what his uncle might know—and tell—about him?

"He's gone. Forget about why," she commanded, warning Philip to hold his tongue to her, and to everybody else.

"You're making a clean sweep, aren't you, Miranda?"

His face was sullen, his tone definitely hostile. "And I'm included in the sweep. All you want is to fling me out of your way, and forget—" He burst out laughing, then stopped suddenly.

It was disagreeable laughter, derisive, even malicious, she felt. She was glad they had reached the carriage block at the back of the house. Philip helped her from her horse, and walked with her to the south wing. Neither of them spoke until they reached the flight of steps leading from the lower gallery to the upper one.

"Aunt Dora makes me go to bed early since I've been ill," Missy said. "I won't be down for tea this evening. Good night."

Philip said good night with his usual voice and manner, and tried to take her hand, but she quickly drew away. Her usual reserve was dictated partly by discretion. This time, she instinctively recoiled from any contact with him. Suddenly, she found herself speaking before she realized what she was going to say.

"Your uncle told me to ask you where you were at the time—the time of the accident."

Philip answered her with perfect calm, and without hesitating. "In the woods, as I've said before, and if he was telling the truth, so was he."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Tired out, Missy slept heavily. No alarm sounded during the night and she woke up later than usual. The aroma of coffee, the sound of voices whispering came to her, and she sat up. Before she could ask, Aunt Dora told her that the levee was still holding, and told her about Philip. Last night, after teatime, he had rung for Little Joe and Gus to come and pack up all of his belongings. This morning, at sunup, Isaiah had sent for the wagon to haul Mr. Philip's baggage to the landing. Both Aunt Dora and Rosie had seen Philip leave the house. He hadn't been long gone—heading for the landing. He had left a letter.

Missy read it. Philip covered a page and more with gracefully expressed thanks for her hospitality; he gave no reason for his sudden decision to go today, if it was sudden. The packet *Magnolia* was due sometime during the day, and as there wouldn't be another for the rest of the week, he planned to take it, unless she needed him, or her aunt preferred him to stay on in case Cibola was marooned by the flood. He finished with, "*When I am erased from Cibola's map, I would like to make sure you will not blot me entirely out of your mind.*" Only this last sentence had a personal note. The rest had a smooth conventional formality, reminding Missy that Philip had already warned her he was not grateful to her, he was resentful. She tore up the pages and dropped them in the scrap basket.

At dinner, Agnes mentioned that Philip had written to her, to thank her and tell her good-by, but she didn't dwell on either Philip's letter or his departure. She said she wished the levee would break, if it was going to break, as it was very wearing

to live on tenterhooks, and went on to bemoan the inconveniences and difficulties ahead if it did.

"Tanglewild'll get the brunt of it." Missy could look farther than her aunt, and foresee the work of cleaning up and repairing and planting a crop after the water went down, but felt sure she could manage as well or better than other planters. "I spent the morning rechecking everything in the storerooms. Everything's ready. There's nothing to do but wait, so you might as well get some rest, ma'am." If the plantation bell began clanging during the night, nobody would get any sleep. "You'll be safe in the house." Missy told her aunt she would be out of it for an hour or so, as she planned to ride to the levee.

After dinner, Agnes sequestered herself in her own room. Missy sent word to Hiram to have her horse saddled, and to saddle another horse for himself, as she wanted him to go with her to the levee. If he was busy in the stables, he could go ahead and get through with his work before he brought the horses up to the house. He needn't hurry; it was too early to start yet. Rain had threatened during the morning, but the weather had cleared. Only a few lazy clouds lingered in the blue sky, and the sun was shining bright and hot.

Missy discarded all her petticoats but one, changed from her thin dress and fragile slippers to her oldest and sturdiest riding habit, and put on thick-soled boots, lacing almost to her knees. She had Rosie plait her hair tightly, wrap the plaits around her head and pin them. Instead of a fashionable riding hat, with a plume sweeping to one side and a veil, Missy found her untrimmed and rather battered small one, and though Rosie murmured, refused to have a veil at all. "I can't have it fluttering and dangling to catch in the briers."

Aunt Dora warned her to be careful, and not to be curious about lingering to watch if the levee started to cave, then went off to her cabin to take in her wash, feed her chickens, and sweep the catkins from her porch, promising to come back to the big house before long.

Ever since she had been warned against her stepfather, Missy had kept her loaded pistol by her bed, but this morning she had taken it back to its usual place, locked in the desk drawer in the study. Instead of going down the back steps to wait for Hiram, she picked up her hat and her leather gauntlets, and

walked along the gallery to the upstairs hall. She passed by the closed door of Roy's empty room, and went down the winding stairs to the lower hall, noticing the silence indoors and out.

It was usual for the house to be quiet at this hour. The servants had washed up the dinner dishes, eaten their own dinner, and had dispersed on various errands to the smokehouse or the dairy.

The two kitchens and the pantries were strung out in the wing. Even if all of the servants had been gathered there, Missy could not have heard their voices once she was in the main part of the house, nor could they have heard hers. The only way to summon them would be to ring for them. There was a bell pull hanging in every room.

Just now the hall and all the rooms opening from it were held in an unbroken hush. Light came in to touch gold leaf, slide along the surface of mirrors and polished wood, and dance in prisms, but as the house faced east the front rooms were already gathering shadows. Someone had closed the front door, she noticed. As she passed a mirror, the reflection of her own face startled her. Even her heavy boots made no sound on the thick carpeting. All she heard was the ticking of a clock and the slight whisper of her skirts. Going through the study door, she caught herself looking over her shoulder, as if something, someone was following her. Of course nothing was there, nothing at all, only a hazy swim of light, a soft blur of shadow.

The room retained a little chill, and was dimmer than the rest of the house, with only narrow strips of sunlight coming in through the slats of the closed shutters. Since Roy's death, she was the only one who came here, and unless she told the servants otherwise, the study was kept shuttered. Throwing her hat and gauntlets on a chair, she took the desk key from its hiding place behind the clock on the mantelpiece, and unlocked the drawer. As she picked up her pistol, her hand touched a bundle of letters lying in the back of the drawer. She knew they were letters Roy had written when he had been away at school. They were to his father, and had always been kept here.

Missy put the pistol on the desk, hesitated, then slipped the top letter from the confining band, leaving the others where they were. Intent on what she was doing, she had forgotten her nervousness. The sight of Roy's familiar handwriting gave her a pang and brought tears to her eyes. She wiped them away, took

the letter to the nearest window, unfolded the pages and began to read. Evidently her father had taken Roy to task for some scrape, and this was Roy's answer. "*You are right about Harris's reputation being none of the best. He is not a particular friend of mine, only an acquaintance, and I am ready to steer clear of him in future. The only reason I happened to be with him that night was by chance. I ran into him, so I took him along. I never like to go anywhere by myself.*"

Missy folded the letter and put it down on the table by the window, hardly realizing what she was doing with it. Her attention was caught and held by the sentence Roy had written a long time ago. What was it? "*I never like to go anywhere by myself.*" That was characteristic of him. The words stamped themselves on her mind, trying to tell her something, something important— The sound of Philip's voice made her whirl around. He was standing in the doorway.

"I thought—I thought you were on the landing—"

"So I was," he said. "For hours. Someone said you were coming to visit the levee. I waited, but you didn't, so I came back."

"You'd better wait on the landing if you intend to take the *Magnolia.*"

"I have plenty of time."

"It might be along any minute."

"Even if it does come, I couldn't leave here without seeing you again."

"I had your letter," she answered woodenly. "There's no use saying any more."

Philip didn't seem to feel her rebuff. "Maybe it was enough for you but not for me." He was smiling at her, the melancholy wistful smile she knew very well.

Missy reminded herself he was only Philip. It was true all the boats were off schedule. He had grown tired of waiting for the packet, yet his reappearance suggested he didn't care if he boarded the *Magnolia* or not. She had the feeling his letter had intended to deceive her.

"I was looking for you, then I saw you coming down the steps, so I followed you."

"Why didn't you speak to me when you saw me instead of following me?" Instead of snaking along after her without a word!

"All I want is a chance to speak to you, Miranda. Can't you spare me a few minutes, a few words?" He added, "Last words."

"I'm on the way to the levee now. If you want, we can ride together." With Hiram for a third, she might have added.

"There's too much bustle and confusion, it's easier to talk here."

"You might not make the boat."

"You're in a great hurry to get me on board the *Magnolia*, aren't you, Miranda?" He noticed the pistol on the desk and frowned.

"What's that doing there?"

"I'm taking it along with me," she answered.

Philip came a few more steps into the room. "I was never Uncle Arnold's puppet, Miranda. When I saw you, I fell in love with you, and you fell in love with me, or at least you led me to think so."

There had been a time when he could make her feel guilty for the encouragement she had once given him; now she wanted to shout at him she was tired of his self-pity, tired of the sight of his face, the sound of his voice.

"If I ever did lead you to think so, you ought to have enough pride to stop harping on it." The door to the hall was a little ajar, and she told herself Philip was fond of her, someone she could always influence, yet she felt ambushed in this room with him. Play for time, though it would be hours before the servants came in to set the table for tea.

Philip moved between her and the desk, his hand out. Missy thought he might intend to pick up the pistol.

"Don't touch it, it's loaded."

Philip drew his hand back. She started for the door, but he came up to her, cornering her.

"You're always very elusive, Miranda, but this last time you'll have to stay and hear me out." His voice was persuasive and pleading. "Do you realize what it cost me to pocket my pride and stay on here under the rules and regulations Roy mapped out for me?"

So this is all he cared for Roy, she thought. Philip wasn't speaking like a devoted friend now.

"You agreed to his rules," she pointed out.

"What else could I do? I couldn't leave Cibola, leave you. I would have won—won you—I had only to wait—"

"Waiting wouldn't have done you any good," she began, then realized it was no use to argue with him. Her nerves had warned her someone was watching her, following her. Someone had, and even if it was only Philip, his stealthiness was sly, unpleasant.

"Then Luke came. But he went away and left you, and I stayed with you."

"Because you had nowhere else to go."

Philip laughed. "Are you as obtuse as you pretend, Miranda? I had plenty of offers!"

"Then you were lying all the time."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I had to, to be near you."

His pale face and inky black eyes chilled her. What a fool she'd been to believe in his fondness and friendship, on her power to keep him within the boundaries she had set for him! Not she, but Arnold Baring had kept Philip in check. He had some hold over Philip, and Philip had been afraid of him. Baring had gone, and if she was free of her fear of him, so was Philip.

"I'd lie, steal, kill to get you. I want you!"

Missy stared at him. He wasn't Philip any more, he had become a stranger. She had caught glimpses of the stranger, and had ignored what she'd seen. Had the Philip she had known and liked ever existed?

"You had better get out of here and away from Cibola before Luke comes."

"He hasn't come yet."

Instinct warned her she was in danger, and had good reason to be afraid. She moved quickly, trying to dodge past him, trying to reach the door. She wasn't quick enough. Philip kicked the door shut. Missy tried to get to the bell pull. Philip moved forward, barring her way. Not taking her eyes from him, she darted for the desk, to get her hands on the pistol. Before she could reach it, Philip sprang at her, seizing her by the shoulders. As she struggled to break his grip, she screamed, but she was panting for breath, and her voice, never loud, didn't carry beyond the room.

"Nobody's anywhere near." Philip pushed her back against the wall. In the dimness, his face had a green pallor, his eyes had no light in their blackness.

"Didn't I warn you I wasn't satisfied with your damn' tepid indifferent charity?"

Fighting to free herself, she didn't hear what he was saying, but she heard the ring of hatred in his voice. In spite of her turnings and twistings, he fastened his mouth against hers. When she succeeded in thrusting his face away from hers, she leaned against the wall, choking and strangling, her shoulders aching from the clamp of Philip's hands. Rage gave her extra strength, and she knew she mustn't waste an ounce of it. Use it to reach the pistol—it was her only hope.

"When I saw Luke dive I hoped to God he'd stay on the bottom of the river!"

Philip's face was coming close to hers again. Missy forced herself to look at him. With his head bent, and his eyes hooded in dark skull shadows, she saw him as she'd seen him once before, walking behind Roy's covered bier. Drops of water, black river water, had dripped from the bier, and Philip's wet footprints had marked the gallery floor in black. "*I never like to go anywhere by myself,*" Roy had written for her to find.

"You—" she whispered. "You were in the skiff with Roy." In a flash, she saw Baring must have known, and Luke suspected it, understood why Eli had been murmuring his eyes hadn't fooled him. He'd caught a glimpse of the skiff, with two people in it.

Philip's face went rigid. "Luke told you that." He lifted his hands from her shoulders, curving his fingers to close around her throat and wring the life out of her.

"Roy told me."

Instinctively, involuntarily, Philip turned his head to look over his shoulder. Seizing her chance, Missy wrenched his arm aside, flung herself away from him, and reached the desk. Her outstretched fingers first touched then grasped the pistol. She snatched it up and whipped around again to face Philip, taking accurate aim, and keeping her finger on the trigger.

He had made no effort to stop her, he seemed too unnerved. Missy braced herself against the desk behind her, watching him. He was standing in the middle of the room, and soon became cool and mocking again as she had so often seen him before.

"I'm waiting," he taunted. "Go ahead."

Instead of inciting her, his goading cleared her head and

steadied her nerves. She had the power to defend herself, and though he had become a madman, she was still sane.

"You despise me, don't you?" he said. "You think I was a coward—you're wrong, Miranda. The three of us were in the woods, and separated, though I soon caught up with Roy. He was waiting for me to go with him. Uncle Arnold wasn't in sight when we pushed off. Afterward, he claimed he saw us together, from a place where the trees thinned out." Philip paused, frowning a little.

She knew the place, where the branches framed a V-shaped bit of river. Philip was leading her there again.

"But Uncle Arnold agreed to the version we—made public. It was to his interest, and, by then, I had means to keep him muzzled."

"You—blackmailed each other."

"If he'd seen the rest—but luckily he didn't. Neither he nor Luke ever came close to the truth. No one has—or will—" Philip's eyes were blank. "No one on earth."

Missy repeated to herself, "No one on earth."

"The squall caught us," he was saying.

She tried not to listen, or believe his wild wanderings, yet the storm had been a reality, and he had been with Roy.

"The worst of it was over by the time we turned back and headed in. We were making the swing around the barge—"

Roy had seen it, had taken care to avoid the danger of going too near the bow.

"We needn't have any secrets between us now, Miranda. It's too late."

Missy dared not take her eyes from him, though the sight of him and the sound of his voice sickened her.

"That's when Roy reminded me *his* sister was not for me! And if I couldn't hide I was jealous I had better leave Cibola and go somewhere else. I couldn't stand any more—I picked up the bailing shingle and cracked him over the head with it. Then he slumped sideways—the skiff overturned—"

She saw Philip, rowing behind Roy, stooping to grasp the water-soaked bailing shingle, striking with fury, and Roy, taken by surprise, stunned by the blow, losing consciousness, the oars slipping from his hands as his body had sagged to one side, while the skiff lurched, tipped, swinging with the current. Philip had seen

one way to hide what he had done, one way to stay on at Cibola —without Roy to come between him and his ambition.

"You overturned the skiff." She clutched at the desk with her free hand, clinging to it to support herself. "You made sure he would drown—"

"Where are your witnesses? Where is your evidence? Try to prove it, Miranda. Try! You can never prove anything, but you can pull the trigger."

She didn't move or speak. Philip slowly walked to the door, flung it wide, and turned to face her again.

"Now I've made sure you'll remember me all the days of your life. Good-by, Miranda." Then he was gone.

She didn't see him go, or hear the door click shut behind him. The room darkened, her knees buckled, and she slumped down in the chair by the desk.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Aunt Dora had come back to the house, and gone up to the sewing room to "piece" on the star quilt she was making for Missy as a wedding present. Rosie and Sadie were there too, catching up on the mending. Hiram had brought the horses from the stables, and was waiting for Missy. Though it was unlike her to be late, no particular time had been set. He might have begun to wonder where she was if he hadn't dozed off. He didn't see the person streaking around the house, getting on a horse tethered behind a hedge of azaleas, then galloping along the road to the levee and Tanglewild Landing.

Another hour passed. It was pleasant in the shade. Hiram slept on until a steamboat whistle made him start awake. He recognized the *Magnolia*, blowing for Tanglewild Landing. Wide awake now, he wondered why Missy didn't come out. After a while, the sound of another steamboat blowing caught his attention. The *Magnolia* had made the landing, and then gone on upriver. The one he had just heard was somewhere near Halcyon, and

must have stopped at Halcyon Landing. The *Magnolia* was the only boat due today. This other didn't sound like any he could name, and he knew them all. He was puzzling over it when Isaiah came out, saw him, and asked where Missy was.

Hiram said he had been waiting for her a long spell. Isaiah went back in the house to look for her, surprised and uneasy because she hadn't started out. He went up and down the hall, calling her. The study was kept closed, but he knew she sometimes shut herself up there. He knocked on the door, calling her more insistently, "Missy, ma'am, Missy, ma'am—"

At the sound of his voice, and his repeated knocking, she raised her head. She remembered she had told him she was going to ride to the levee, and had sent word to Hiram to bring the horses. Rousing herself, she looked around, went to the door, opened it wide enough to tell Isaiah she was coming, and asked him to bring her some strong coffee. Her hair was falling over her shoulders. With numbed fingers, she plaited it again and groped for the long tortoise-shell pins scattered over the carpet. She found one and pinned the braids around her head.

When Isaiah came back with the coffee, she was sitting in the hall. She had put on her hat, gathered up her gauntlets and her pistol, and tucked the torn end of her narrow linen collar in the neckline of her jacket. The strong material of her riding habit had withstood the struggle with Philip. There was nothing noticeably wrong with her appearance, but the look on her face, the effort she made to speak, and the strange sound of her voice, worried Isaiah. He was about to ask her if she felt well enough to ride so far, then guessed she was not ill—she was "troubled in her mind"—and said nothing. He had put plenty of whiskey in her coffee. Though she didn't seem to notice the taste of it, he thought the whiskey would do her good. She drank it without comment, thanked him, and went out.

Like all the servants, Hiram knew why Missy was alert to the sound of a steamboat blowing. She was expecting Mr. Luke. He was coming down the river, steaming along to Cibola. Riding with her to the levee, Hiram mentioned the unfamiliar packet. He knew the sound of all the boats coming and going, and was sure he had never heard this one before. What packet was due around now? Missy had not heard either the *Magnolia*, or any other steamboat blowing. She heard what Hiram was say-

ing to her now without understanding the meaning of his question. She answered she didn't know which one it could be.

For the first time in her life, she failed to notice her surroundings. She and Hiram came to the bridge spanning the low swampy area just beyond the lake. On one side of the bridge, cypresses fringed the lake, on the other, dense, vine-tangled trees marked the end of the cultivated land. Before she realized she had reached the bridge, she had crossed it, and was riding on the corduroy road. The sawed-off logs had succeeded in making a firm enough surface for the wagons to come and go to the levee without sinking in the "gumbo" mud, but Hiram murmured it made uneasy riding. The road turned and, screened by rustling cottonwoods, it wandered on to the landing and the levee ahead.

At first, Missy didn't see the man on horseback galloping toward her. He saw her, and spurred on faster to meet her, calling her. It was Luke. He had come back. Halted behind her, Hiram was thanking the good Lord for bringing Mr. Luke back. She saw the color of Luke's eyes, and felt his arms around her as he lifted her out of the saddle. She didn't have to remember his kisses, or imagine them. They were real. This was the texture, shape, force, and fire of his mouth. The thunder in her ears was so loud it must come from the echo of his heartbeats as well as from hers.

She clung to him without speaking, and when she drew away to look at him, she saw his face just as she had pictured him to herself while he had been gone. Luke found her changed. He had received a hearty welcome from the hands and the overseers on the levee. Mr. 'Bijah Sims had told him Missy had been ailing for a few days, but was well now.

"You've had some kind of illness," Luke accused her. She said she was over it. He frowned at her, thinking she had the wan look of someone who had been through a siege of fever.

"You shouldn't have come so far," he said. "But since you're this near the levee, you can take a look at it, then I'll ride with you to the house."

He went to speak to Hiram, and shake hands with him. Hiram said he had heard that boat blowing, and had been watching out for Luke. Now he had come, and everything was going to be all right.

"Unless you want to see the levee, you can go on back, Hiram," Luke told him. "I'll take care of Missy."

Hiram turned his horse, and rode off to Cibola, delighted to be the one to spread the good news.

When Luke put Missy on her horse, he held her hand to his lips. He noticed her glove was too big for her.

"You're thinner than when I left," he said. "You've been through too much. From now on, I'm going to look after you, and you're going to do what I tell you."

He reminded her she had promised to marry him as soon as he came back. He was going to hold her to her word. They had planned a very quiet wedding anyway. As soon as her mother, Sara, and a minister could get here, they would be married.

"All right," Missy agreed, "but we'll have to wait for Uncle Frank and Aunt Lucie."

"They're at Halcyon now," Luke said. "They came with me. Look—"

Missy looked. The levee was in front of her, and above it, on the river, she saw the steamboat Luke had described to her when it had only been an idea of his. Here it was, gleaming with paint and polish, riding high on the flood, scrawling smoke against the sky. The golden letters twinkled in the late afternoon sunlight, spelling out her name, *MIRANDA*.

The Ardens and Luke had planned to surprise Missy by coming together on his boat; they had joined him in Louisville, met his parents, and made the trip down the river with him. He had put them off at Halcyon Landing, and had brought his boat on to Tanglewild Landing, putting his crew to work on the levee. The harassed overseers and tired hands were glad to get more men.

"Of course I started off right away to find you," he said to Missy. "Your Uncle Frank and Aunt Lucie want you to spend a few days with them at Halcyon."

"I'd like to, but I can't leave Aunt Agnes alone in the house with the servants. She's afraid of the high water."

"Then I'll take you to Halcyon the first thing tomorrow." He didn't say he would take her in a rowboat, if necessary. He noticed she seemed strangely unconcerned about the danger to the levee.

Missy was gazing at the steamboat. She turned to him and smiled. It was the first time he had seen her smile since they had met.

"Aren't you going to take me on board?" she asked.

"Not today, it's too late. It'll be tied up here for some time—until we go off on our honeymoon. You'll have plenty of opportunity to inspect every inch of it."

Luke agreed to let her walk to the top of the levee, speak to his men, talk to the overseers if she wanted, and get a closer view of the boat. The levee's slope was usually smooth with grass. Now its original contours were buried under a superstructure of earth and sandbags. Holding Missy's hand in his to help her over the rough, hummocky surface, Luke led her to the top of the ridge. His men came up to speak to her and smile at her, then went on with their task of hauling more sandbags to the levee's crown.

The overseers said Luke's packet was as fine as any on the river. His coming had cheered them, and cheered the hands. They moved more briskly, talked more and sang in rhythm as they worked. Luke listened to the voices and watched Missy's face.

"Are you tired?" he asked her.

"No, I like being out here with you."

"It's getting late." He eyed the corduroy road, where the logs had been placed close together. It was practical for the heavily laden wagons, he said, but rough for her to ride. Her mare might stumble.

"Bess is sure-footed, and I can find my way over that road in pitch dark. Let's wait a while, please, Luke." She put her hand over his.

In the distance, the tawny flood took on the reflections of the luminous sky. The boat glittered on the current. Boat and river were at the top of the levee, higher than Tanglewild. Luke turned to study what he could see of the plantation. Tanglewild's wagons and Jack Bolton's horse waited a good distance upstream from the slough. If the levee began to give way, the hands could go along its ridge until they were abreast of the wagons, run down the levee, get in the wagons and drive off. As most of the mules had been sent away, some of the men would have to get to the gin on foot. They would have plenty of time to reach it.

Bolton said he planned to ride to the stable, get his horse up on a ramp, and walk over to his house. Luke had noticed it was built of brick and frame, like the main house on Tanglewild, with the upper floor high enough to escape any flood. In both houses the rooms on the ground floor would be filled with water. The thing to do was to open all the doors, letting the water ripple in and out, to keep the foundations from being undermined.

Another cluster of wagons, and some saddled mules waited close to the road, on the downstream side of the slough. Missy's mare and Luke's horse were tethered by the wagons. Everybody going back to Cibola belonged in that grouping. When Luke had come, Mr. 'Bijah had offered him the extra horse tethered beside his own, without thinking how an unaccounted for horse had happened to be there. If he had not been caught up in the stir and excitement of Luke's arrival on a shining new packet, and bringing more men to help with the levee, Mr. 'Bijah might have wondered about the horse, and asked questions.

Preoccupied and busy, he had not seen Philip gallop to the landing and leave the horse. One of the hands had come by, had looped the reins over a low branch, and had gone on. When the *Magnolia* had glided slowly to the landing, the two overseers had watched the pilot, to make sure he didn't send a wash over the top of the levee. The roustabouts had seized the mail, and the baggage they found waiting to be picked up. As no one had come forward to board the boat, the *Magnolia* had steamed upriver without taking on a passenger at Tanglewild Landing.

With Mr. 'Bijah bawling at them to make tracks and get back to their work, the hands had snatched the mail and the barrels the *Magnolia* had deposited. They had not seen anyone on the landing. The person waiting there had moved out of sight, to the other side of the warehouse, until the hands had gone. The warehouse was built of wood and set high on tall stilts. While the sun was up, it cast a square black patch of shade. The man on the landing stayed in the shade. Looking around the edge of the warehouse, he had watched Luke's boat come. He had seen the red-painted smokestacks and the golden letters, had read the name, her name. He had heard the shouts hailing Luke.

Now all of the landing was in the shade. The sun was going down behind the trees, flinging a darkness over Tanglewild. The

sky was still bright, the golden letters still flared and danced on the wide burnished river. One of the hands came with a lighted lantern, set it on the warehouse platform, and went away, singing "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen." No one else came. The man waiting there alone was a shadow within a shadow.

All along the levee's ridge, the men were moving back and forth, calling to one another as they worked, "toting" heavy loads, feverishly building with earth and sand. It was not quite sundown, but the tall cottonwoods behind the levee made a duskiness. Lanterns began to glow, one after the other, as if the men were afraid of night catching them unprepared. One of Luke's crew paused to wipe his sweating face and stare at the Mississippi. "Out yonder ain't air man's river—"

Mr. 'Bijah came up to Missy. "I reckon you feel kind of set-up, ma'am. Can't every young lady claim she's got a fine, newfangled packet named after her. Don't you let all the confusion and botheration fret you. It's easier to git yo'self married in high-water time than to git yo'self buried."

"And much more cheerful," Luke added, moving a little away from her to give final directions to his crew. His friend and partner, now acting as sole pilot, would be in charge of the boat, and already knew what to do in case of a crevasse. He would move downstream from the break, and tie up below the landing.

Jack Bolton, watching the narrow dark line of the slough where a little rain water lingered, suddenly shouted for more sandbags in a hurry. Mr. 'Bijah scrambled down the slope to join him. Missy and Luke followed, keeping out of the way of the men converging on the threatened spot. Beyond the sandbags heaped in the slough at the levee's base, a patch of ripples quiv- the men converging on the threatened spot. Beyond the sandbags but the ripplings darted from under them, began to heave and bubble, and the sandbags slipped out of place. The whole levee shuddered and shook with the pressure of the river. The men fought on until water came trickling through the base of the levee. The overseers realized what that meant. The river was eating in, and, as the thin stream widened, they knew they could not check it. They shouted, "Sandboil in the slough! Clar off—everybody!"

The cry was repeated all along the levee. Luke saw wet earth slump and slide to the levee's base. He looked at Missy. She was

watching, and understood there was no longer any hope of holding the levee, but she was perfectly calm, thanking the overseers, and the men within earshot.

"It's time for you to leave," Luke said to her, leading her up the slope away from the endangered area.

"Let's wait until the hands and your men have gone. If you were by yourself you would stay to see what happens."

Luke refused to admit to her he was curious to see a crevasse for himself.

"I'm not going to let you linger to watch."

The overseers told him it was safe enough for Missy to stay where she was for a little while. The road was well to one side, and would not be in the path of the onrushing water. So far, there was nothing to see except the crumbling and sliding earth, and the agitation in the slough. Luke ordered his men back to the boat. They massed at the gangplank and filed across it. Bolton herded Tanglewild's hands upstream from the undermined segment of levee. He said he would get along himself, as he had to make sure the mules were led to the upper floor of the barn. In a day or so, he would get them off on a raft. It would be a long time before they would be needed for plowing.

Everybody drew away from the crumbling stretch, Tanglewild's people above it, and Cibola's below it, dividing into two groups. By morning, Tanglewild—the Island—would be one with the lake. There would be no communication between the two plantations, no comings and goings except by rowboat or dugout made out of hollowed segments of tree trunk. The lighted lanterns danced along, flickered away like swamp fire as the hands ran down the levee and climbed in the wagons. The drivers whipped up the mules, and the wagons set off, clattering on the road to Cibola.

Nothing had happened yet, Luke thought, though he saw a sandbag slide into the river, and more earth slump into the slough. No one could tell when the river would break through the barrier. Luke knew the lake would deepen first, and though he had never been far on the road leading from Tanglewild to Cibola—he had taken the other road, from Halcyon—he realized this one must be fairly near the lake too. When Mr. 'Bijah was ready to start for Cibola, Luke put his arm around Missy and led her to her horse.

He put her in the saddle, swung himself on his own horse, and for a while they rode with Mr. 'Bijah. He spurred up to give some orders to the driver of the wagon ahead of him. Missy and Luke paused to watch the lighted windows of the boat flash by, moving downstream. Luke urged Missy on. She started riding at a brisk pace until she reached the turn in the road, where she halted to look at the levee again. The crown showed a depression against the sky.

If she and Luke had been nearer, they would have seen the water streaming in faster at the base, and thin lines of water crawling over, worrying at the earth and sandbags, pushing them with a low slobbering sound. No one was there to hear except the shadow who had moved, picked up the lighted lantern left on the warehouse platform and had come to stand where the earth was quavering, sinking beneath his feet, and the river was seething over the top of the levee.

"I don't see anything spectacular yet," Missy said.

"I'm not going to let you loiter here until you do." Luke thought she was much too calm.

"Look, Luke—there's someone on the levee, holding a lantern!"

"Everybody's gone—" he began, but he couldn't deny he saw the glow of a lantern, and a dark immobile figure standing where the earth would give way any minute.

"Maybe one of the hands is too frightened to move. We'll have to go back and see, Luke!"

Part of her mind was still numb, but she had the habit of taking responsibility.

"You ride on," Luke said. "Go with Mr. 'Bijah, and I'll take a look."

"I'd rather stay with you—it'll only be a few minutes."

"It'll take fifteen, and more. You're wasting time, and it makes me uneasy to have you out here. Go on, darling. Hurry!"

"All right," she agreed, and went. Once around the turn of the road, she unconsciously slowed her mare's pace. She was too accustomed to her surroundings to be afraid, and she was still in a state of shock, able to move, to speak, but not able to think with her usual alertness.

Riding toward the levee, Luke cursed the lone figure Missy had seen. Nearer, the branches hid his view. When he saw the levee again through the trees, the figure had vanished. The lantern

still glowed, but now it was on a line with the levee. No one was holding it. It looked as if someone had set it down. As he watched, the lantern toppled, blinked, and disappeared. Where it had been he saw dark, foam-edged water curling. Soon, the river was going to break through with a rush.

Wheeling around, Luke spurred his horse on to catch up with Missy. He knew he had not imagined what they both had seen. His men had gone back to the boat. The overseers had sent the hands off before they had gone themselves, yet someone had been standing there. Who could it have been? He didn't know, but he knew what had happened. While he had been riding to the levee, and while the trees had hidden his view, more earth had caved in the river, taking the one who had been there with it.

Then why had the lantern been left? It had looked as if someone had put it down deliberately—almost as if that vaguely defined silhouette had allowed himself to be swallowed up. Of course that was impossible! Luke decided he would tell Missy part of the truth—when he had gone closer he had only seen a lantern, a lighted lantern. She would think one of the men had forgotten it, and be satisfied, until she found out one of the hands had gone without a trace. She would be unhappy, but she need not know it yet. He was unhappy himself, thinking of the poor crazy devil flung down in the river, but now his first concern was to get Missy to safety.

His horse's hoofs were noisy on the rough-hewn timbers set in the road, but he was aware of the stirrings and rustlings through the trees around him as the water seeped through the base of the levee and spread from the overflowing slough. The lake connected with the dammed slough, and would deepen fast when the river had eaten up enough of the levee to burst in. He judged there was enough time to outride the flood, but the lake would soon be up beyond its usual boundaries. He wanted Missy to be on the other side of it.

Overhead was the clear green sky of a springtime twilight. Behind him, Luke heard a grinding rumbling, then a deep roaring. The river had burst through the levee. The earth shook, the trees quivered. He urged more speed out of his horse, and thought of the twenty-minute delay. The road was making a gentle curve. To his right, a fringe of cypresses bordered and hid the lake. Water undulated through the trees, covered the

road. His horse went splashing into it. Luke had thought it would take another half hour for the lake to overflow enough to reach the road. It was shallow, and he thought he would get through it quickly. Where was Missy? He hoped she had reached Cibola by now.

The roaring was louder. Ahead was more water, obliterating the outlines of the road. Suddenly, unbelievably, instead of being shallow, the water deepened. Luke urged his horse on. Then he saw Missy, struggling in a swirl of current.

She had heard the thunder before she reached the bridge. The sound brought her back to the present, made her alert and aware. The river was hurling masses of water into the lake by way of the slough. Her little horse reared in terror. Missy spoke soothingly to her, "Come on, Bess, we must hurry." The mare obeyed the familiar tone and touch, galloping along steadily until she came to the water on the road. At the edge of it, she halted again, quivering. Luke could make his way to Cibola much more easily if he was not burdened with her, Missy thought. She glanced back, and seeing nothing but the twilight thickening through the trees, decided not to wait for him. Again the mare responded, and obediently went on into the water.

Missy looked for the bridge. It had disintegrated, disappeared. Posts, railings, timbers were floating in the water. She was afraid to go on, but though she was tempted to turn back, or to wait where she was, she knew it would be better to brave the water now, before it deepened more. She rode on, and for some yards felt she was making headway in spite of her fear of the water, but parts of the bridge drifted around her, and the pieces of wood making the corduroy of the road had begun to lift up and float, bumping into the mare, impeding her.

Missy tried to keep the heavy skirts of her riding habit wound closely around her, but while she was using both hands on the reins, her skirt ballooned in the water, and became entangled in a bobbing log. Leaning out of the saddle, she extricated herself and pulled Bess away from the log. The wagons must have reached Cibola without any trouble, she told herself, but they had gone over the bridge. If she had reached it five minutes sooner, she could have crossed it too. If she and Luke had followed right behind the wagons, they would now be safely on the other side.

The roar from the crevasse obliterated every other sound. The road she knew had become lost, had become part of the lake, and the lake she knew had changed. It was no longer quiet, but restless, spilling over its banks, coiling through the cypresses to her right. It was almost dark, around her the trees were massed in blots of shadow against the sky, and everywhere she looked she could only see sliding blackness of the invading deluge. Bess was swimming now, breasting the quickening current from the lake—a lake mixed with river, infused with the river's life. Missy tried to keep to the outline of the vanished road, between the tall cypresses and the formless blackening grove to her left, tried to conquer a growing sense of desperation. The water was chilly, the current buffeted her, dragged at her, and held her here.

She didn't hear Luke calling her, his voice was lost in the roar. She didn't know he was beside her until his hand fell over hers, grasping the reins, keeping her mare from getting caught in a mass of sedgy drift.

"I forgot how low the ground is here—" Missy panted. "There was a bridge—"

"Never mind, we'll do without it," Luke reassured her, hiding his worry. He was afraid for her. Dropping the reins, he caught her up, lifted her from her sidesaddle and put her in front of him, holding her with one arm around her waist, guiding his horse with his other hand.

"Bess can swim better without you. She'll make it—so will we—"

Missy tucked up her sodden skirts, wrapping them around her. Luke's arm tightened to support her, telling her to lean against him. He noticed she didn't seem to be afraid, and hoped she didn't understand the precariousness of their situation as well as he did. She had been ill, he knew, and was tired, and was now in actual danger. He had to choose the lesser dangers for her. He didn't know the reactions and capacities of the medium-sized bay they were riding. He would stay in the saddle as long as possible. If he had to swim, Missy would be in the water where the logs were jostling all around in the dark.

The rosy afterglow had faded out of the sky. Night had come, one of those clear moonless nights massing impenetrable shadows. The wagons had gone, Mr. 'Bijah had gone. The overseer didn't know there had been a delay. Busy with his own task of getting

hands, mules, and wagons to shelter, it would take time for him to realize Missy had not reached Cibola, and yet more time for him to turn back to search for her.

The horse was swimming without making progress through the pummeling logs. The current darted, gaining force every minute, threatening to push horse and riders into the tangle of trees to the left, where the low marshy ground was already engulfed. Luke knew what it would mean to be swept into those woods. He would have to catch on to a tree, get Missy into the branches to keep her from being drowned, making sure to find one with branches low enough to reach, yet high enough to be well out of the water.

A search would start, but how could she be found before morning? No lights could pierce that density, no shouts could be heard, not even a foot away. In there, briers and cane grew thick. Luke made the horse battle on against the leftward rush of the current, knowing he must keep Missy from being dragged into the flooded mat of snake-infested thorns and spikes. He urged and guided the horse to resist the current, taking it at an angle, following the submerged road. Somewhere, at the farther bank of the lake, the ground began to rise.

The horse veered, shying at the scrapings and brushings from the twigs of a torn limb, then obeyed the pull on the reins, thrusting into the current again, fighting it. One branch was a minor obstacle, yet Luke saw it as an ominous sign of what was to come. He remembered the cottonwoods clustered behind the levee. Some of them were, or had been behind the break, too close to resist the direct impact of the river storming through. By now the water churning around them had scoured the earth from their roots, and sent the trees rolling on the flood. Part of their wreckage was already being carried on to the lake, and the lake was beginning to spew it out. Used to seeing in the dark, Luke watched the drift coming from the right.

The segments of the washed-out bridge and the logs from the road had moved on with the current, but the water was still full of debris. Skeins of tough vines coiled around the horse's legs, making the struggle to swim that much harder. Luke tried to save and use the horse's strength. How long would it hold out? He had to be ready to get Missy out of the saddle and

swim with her if the horse began to founder. So far, the bay was swimming, going ahead.

Luke felt the water heave, billowing higher. He could make out sharp prongs thrusting up from the surface—a big limb, still attached to a mass of tree, bristling black in the black water, but defined by tatters of foam. The heavy undulations showed its size and weight. On it came, riding the swells it sent before it, rising and sinking. The bay reacted by trying to turn. Keeping a firm grip on Missy, Luke held the horse to the right-angle course, knowing it was the only way, even though he was forcing the horse to swim toward the tree.

Luke watched it swing closer, measured the distance, and how fast the current was bringing it. He glanced at Missy, realizing she must be exhausted. She had turned her head to see what was bearing down on them.

He leaned his face against hers. "Don't worry, we'll dodge it."

They must not be trapped in the sprawl of sharp, wrenched-off branches, the net of twigs and leaves. Once caught, they would be dragged below the surface. The water billowed up. For a moment, Luke felt the horse sag, and realized the risk of trying to swim with Missy. He would stay in the saddle with her as long as he could, but if the horse foundered now— Using reins and spurs, he prodded the bay on to plunge forward, to charge against the current with renewed vigor. Luke eyed the hulk of tree as it rocked and dipped. They were gaining on it—a little more, and they would be out of its path. The tree lurched by. Luke felt the horse's spurt of speed, felt the push of the current ebb as they broke free from it and reached calm water.

"We're out of the worst," Luke said to Missy, to encourage her. "There's not much more."

"Not any more," she answered. "We're on Cibola."

She was right. The ground had slanted up, the horse was no longer swimming, but pulling through the water, less and less water, becoming shallow patches, dwindling to nothing, to solid earth. Missy turned to look back at the lake. Looking too, Luke said, "Here comes Bess."

Shaking her wet mane, the mare was trotting up to thrust her nose under Missy's hand. Luke saw lanterns swaying in the dark, heard shouts and calls, and shouted in answer, to tell the worried searching party that Missy was safe. Dropping the reins, he put

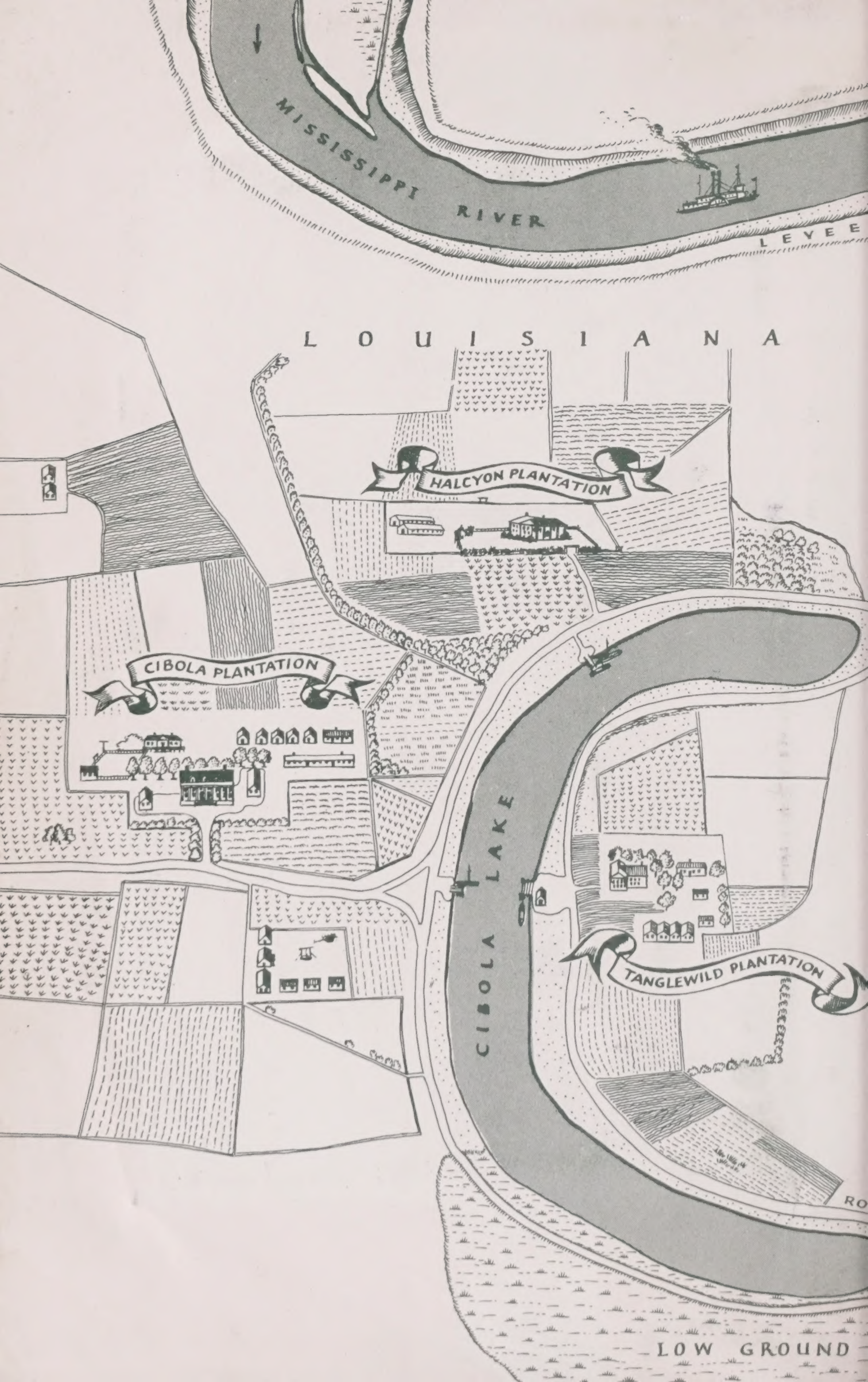
both arms around her, clutching her to him. Ahead, the road leading to the quarters and branching to the house was still untouched by the flood, all of Cibola was untouched. On Cibola, when the water came, if it came, it would rise slowly, lie placid and shallow, without doing harm. When it receded the river would endow Cibola with another layer of fertile earth.

It was strange, Luke thought, to find a serene night glittering with stars, to hear human voices instead of nothing but the river's inhuman voice.

"Missy, we're home—"

Too tired to think or speak, she leaned against him. The overseer was asking questions, Luke was explaining. The words were vague to her, but she heard Mr. 'Bijah's anxiety and relief, heard the Negroes thanking the Lord. She saw blurs of warm yellow light from the lanterns circling around her, reflecting a glow on the dark faces wavering before her eyes. She saw Cibola's people as the band of angels, the children Moses led, waiting for her, and for Luke to come home.

The roar of the Mississippi hurling through the crevasse reverberated for miles, and would be heard for weeks. As the flood ebbed, the wild thundering would lose its violence, and when the river flowed within its banks again, the last echoes would fade into silence. Then the work of plowing, clearing, planting and rebuilding would begin again.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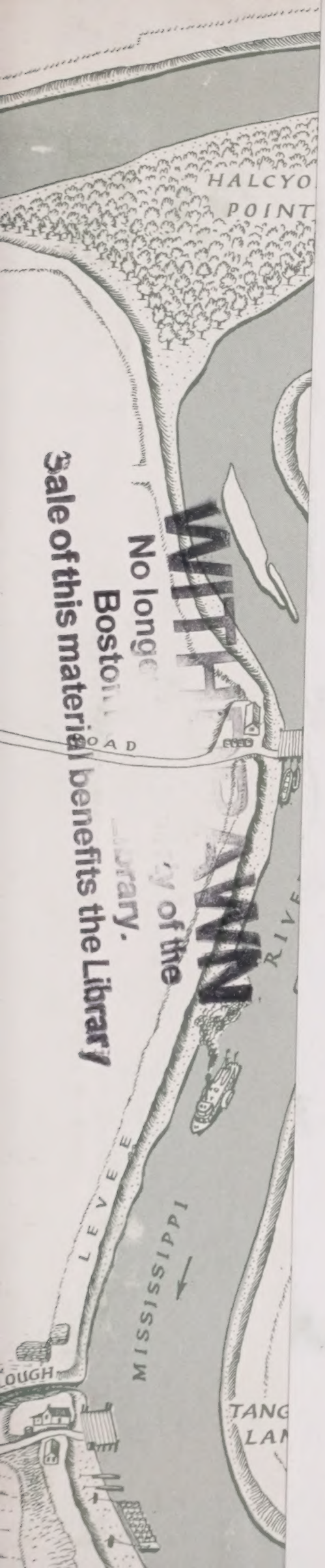

(continued from front flap)

and Roy from the plantation so he could own it. As time passed something developed between Dr. Baring and Aunt Agnes that even Missy's mother never knew about.

As trouble developed at Cibola, Luke Lydell was having his own troubles on the river boat, the *Great Mogul*. His tragedy on the river caused him to visit Cibola, to meet Missy and to help her when tragedy changed her life.

CIBOLA is a story of love and hate, of violence of people and of nature when the river floods and sweeps the plantation. It is a story written with the sympathy and understanding of the people and the country that only a native could feel and communicate.

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Cibola

PHOTO BY BOB MARTEL

ALICE WALWORTH GRAHAM grew up in Natchez and spent a great deal of time on the plantations which she describes so lovingly in this novel. For the last twenty-five years she has been living in New Orleans with her husband and son but she still goes back to Mississippi. She has written *Natchez Woman, Romantic Lady, Indigo Bend, The Vows of the Peacock,* and *Shield of Honor.*